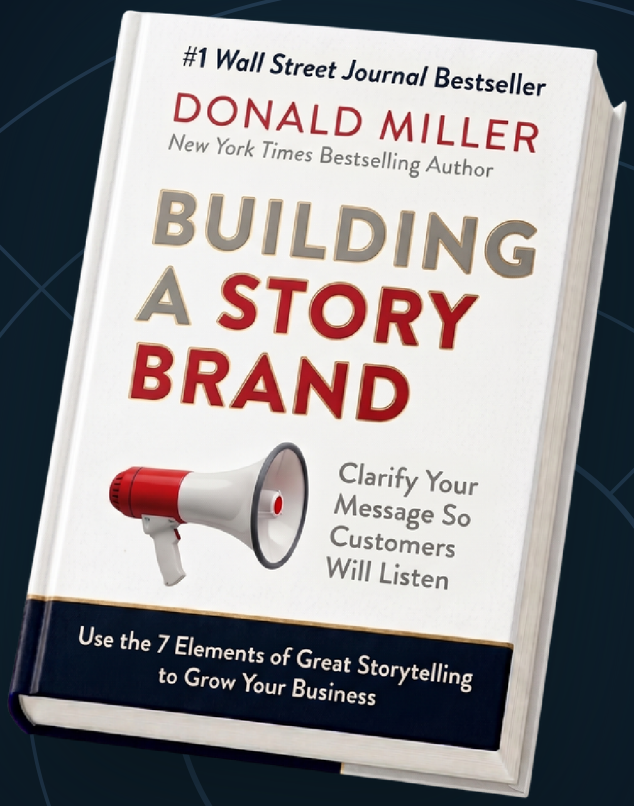
BOOK SYNOPSIS · 10 KEY LESSONS

Building a StoryBrand

by **Donald Miller** · 2017

The big ideas, read through the eyes of a business owner — *and exactly how to use them.*



Field guide narrated by

Steve Cory

START HERE

Why this book

M ost businesses fail to communicate clearly not because they have nothing valuable to say, but because they've made themselves the center of the conversation. Donald Miller's StoryBrand framework fixes that with a seven-part messaging template drawn from universal story structure. It's one of the most practical marketing books I've encountered because it gives you a specific, usable tool — not just principles. The core insight — that the customer is the hero and you are the guide — sounds simple until you go look at your own marketing and realize how much of it is about you. That realization alone is worth the read. Teaching Point 10 is the one I find most personally resonant. The guide with scars principle — the idea that your experience is your authority, not your credentials — is the foundation of everything the Ignite community is built around.

HOW TO READ THIS GUIDE

This is a narrated field guide — my teaching points, my voice, my perspective on how this material applies to you as a business owner. The book is Miller's. The application and the lens are mine. Where you see My Take, that's me responding to the framework from 27 years of being in business — what I agree with, what I'd push back on, and what I've actually seen. Lines in quotation marks are the author's exact words. Lines marked The Big Idea are the author's idea in my words. MY TAKE Where I respond to the author from my own experience. YOUR MOVE One action to take this week. HONEST QUESTION The one you probably don't want to answer.

MY QUICK SUMMARY

Your customer is the hero. You are the guide. Stop making your marketing about you. Clarify the customer's problem at all three levels — external, internal, and philosophical. Give them a simple three-step plan. Paint both the failure and success pictures. Lead with empathy before authority. And learn to say what you do in one sentence that makes the right person feel immediately understood. The StoryBrand framework is a filter you apply to every single piece of communication that goes out from your business. When it becomes habitual, everything you say becomes clearer — and clearer always converts better.

AT A GLANCE

The 10 Lessons

01	**The customer is the hero. You are the guide.**
02	**Clarify the problem at all three levels**
03	**Every hero needs a guide with a plan**
04	**Direct and transitional calls to action**
05	**Paint both pictures: failure and success**
06	**Empathy before authority**
07	**The one-liner: four components, one sentence**
08	**The website wireframe: clarity over beauty**
09	**StoryBrand is a filter for every communication**
10	**The guide with scars: your experience is your authority**

LESSON 01 OF 10

01 The customer is the hero. You are the guide.

This is the single most important reframe in the book — and the one most businesses get backwards. Companies instinctively center themselves in their own marketing. Our story, our history, our team, our awards. And while all of that may be true and worth knowing, it has almost nothing to do with why a client decides to hire you. Clients don't care about your story. They care about their own. The business that understands this and positions itself as the guide — the one who empowers the customer to win — resonates at a completely different level than the one still talking about itself. Yoda doesn't tell his own story. He helps Luke tell his. That's the framework. And it changes everything about how you communicate.

> **MY TAKE — STEVE CORY**
>
> This is the insight that reoriented how I think about every piece of communication — marketing, sales conversations, even the way I structure teaching. The moment I stopped leading with my credentials and started leading with the client's problem, the quality of the conversation changed immediately. People don't need to know your story before they trust you. They need to feel understood.

KEY PRINCIPLES

- Every great story has a hero and a guide. The customer is always the hero.

- The guide has two qualities: empathy (I understand your problem) and authority (I can solve it).
- Marketing that centers the brand repels. Marketing that centers the customer attracts.
- The guide doesn't disappear — they bring wisdom, experience, and a plan. They just don't make it about them.

THE BIG IDEA / IN THE AUTHOR'S WORDS

Customers don't want to hear about your story. They want to be invited into a story where they are the hero and you are the one who helps them win.

— Donald Miller, paraphrased

YOUR MOVE

Read your homepage or your most recent marketing piece. Count how many times the subject is 'we' or your brand name versus 'you' or your client. The ratio tells you everything about who your marketing is currently for.

HONEST QUESTION

If a prospect read your marketing and had to answer 'whose story is this about?' — would the honest answer be yours or theirs?

LESSON 02 OF 10

02 Clarify the problem at all three levels

Miller identifies three levels of customer problem and argues that most businesses only address the first one. The external problem is the visible surface issue — the thing the client would describe if you asked what's wrong. I need more clients. My website isn't generating leads. My team isn't performing. The internal problem is the emotional experience of having that external problem. I feel invisible. I'm embarrassed when prospects find a competitor first. I feel like I'm failing the team that depends on me. The philosophical problem is the deeper sense that this situation simply shouldn't exist. Good businesses should be findable. Hard-working owners deserve to grow. People who do excellent work shouldn't have to fight for recognition. Most businesses speak to the external problem only. Clients buy based on the internal. They become loyal based on the philosophical.

> **MY TAKE — STEVE CORY**
>
> The internal level is where I think most small businesses leave the most opportunity. It's uncomfortable to write about how a client feels — it seems presumptuous or soft. But the emotional dimension of a business problem is almost always what's driving the urgency. Nobody calls an advisor because they intellectually identified a gap. They call because they're frustrated, worried, or embarrassed. Name that honestly and you'll stand out immediately.

KEY PRINCIPLES

- External: the visible surface problem — what the client would say if you asked what's wrong.
- Internal: the emotional experience of having that problem — how it makes them feel.
- Philosophical: the deeper sense that this situation simply should not exist in the world.
- Clients buy to solve the internal problem. The external is just how they describe it.

THE BIG IDEA / IN THE AUTHOR'S WORDS

Companies tend to sell solutions to external problems, but people buy solutions to internal problems. Miss the internal level and you miss the sale.

— Donald Miller, paraphrased

YOUR MOVE

Write your client's problem at all three levels right now. External, internal, philosophical. If the internal and philosophical feel uncomfortable to say out loud — that's exactly what your marketing has been missing.

HONEST QUESTION

Does your current marketing speak to how your client feels about their problem — or only to what the problem technically is?

LESSON 03 OF 10

03 Every hero needs a guide with a plan

The guide's most important contribution isn't empathy or even authority. It's a clear plan. The hero — your client — is standing at the edge of their problem, wanting to move forward but uncertain about what that movement looks like. Confusion is the primary barrier to action. Not price. Not competition. Confusion. Miller argues the plan should be three to four steps. No more. Not because simplicity is a virtue in the abstract, but because the confused mind says no. A clear three-step process transforms the decision from 'I'm not sure what happens next' to 'I can see exactly where this goes.' That visibility is what converts interest into commitment.

> **MY TAKE — STEVE CORY**
>
> This is especially important in a relationship-driven market like Middle Tennessee where trust is already doing some of the work. Even when a prospect trusts you personally, they still need to see the path. The plan doesn't reduce your credibility — it increases it. It says: I've done this enough times to know exactly how it works.

KEY PRINCIPLES

- The plan must be three to four steps. More than that creates the confusion you're trying to eliminate.
- Each step should be named simply enough to explain in one sentence.

- The plan transforms an ambiguous decision into an obvious next step.
- Confused prospects don't buy. Clear prospects do.

THE BIG IDEA / IN THE AUTHOR'S WORDS

Customers do not take action when they are confused. A clear plan removes confusion and replaces it with a sense of certainty about what happens next.

— Donald Miller, paraphrased

YOUR MOVE

Write your three-step plan for how a client works with you. Name each step clearly. If you can't describe the process in three steps that a stranger would immediately understand, the process isn't clear enough to communicate — or consistently deliver.

HONEST QUESTION

When a prospect asks 'what does working with you actually look like?' — do you have a clear, consistent three-step answer, or does it depend on the conversation?

LESSON 04 OF 10

04 Direct and transitional calls to action

Most business marketing has one of two problems with calls to action: either there's no CTA at all, or there's a direct CTA for every prospect regardless of where they are in the decision process. Miller makes a useful distinction. The direct CTA asks for the commitment immediately — schedule a call, buy now, apply today. The transitional CTA provides value before asking for commitment — download the guide, watch the video, attend the event. Both are necessary because prospects arrive at different points in their readiness. The one ready to commit needs a direct CTA. The one still evaluating needs a transitional one that builds trust before the ask. A page with only a direct CTA loses everyone not yet ready. A page with only a transitional CTA never moves anyone who is.

> **MY TAKE — STEVE CORY**
>
> The transitional CTA is the most underused tool in most small business marketing. Most owners are so focused on getting the appointment that they ignore the large percentage of prospects who need more before they're ready to commit. The transitional CTA says: come a little closer. You don't have to decide anything yet. That invitation often produces more long-term clients than the direct ask ever could.

KEY PRINCIPLES

- Direct CTA: asks for the commitment now. Every page needs one.
- Transitional CTA: provides value before the ask, for the prospect not yet ready to commit.
- Both must be present. The direct CTA serves buyers. The transitional CTA nurtures prospects.
- The unclear or absent CTA is one of the most expensive problems on most business websites.

THE BIG IDEA / IN THE AUTHOR'S WORDS

If you have not given your customer a clear, direct call to action, you have not given them permission to buy. The unclear CTA is the most expensive element of most websites.

— Donald Miller, paraphrased

YOUR MOVE

Review your primary marketing page. Does it have a direct CTA above the fold? A transitional CTA somewhere below it? If either is missing, add both before the end of this week.

HONEST QUESTION

What percentage of the people who visit your main marketing page are ready to commit immediately — and what are you offering the other percentage who aren't?

LESSON 05 OF 10

05 Paint both pictures: failure and success

Stories are driven by two forces: the fear of a negative outcome and the desire for a positive one. Research consistently shows that humans are more motivated by the fear of loss than the prospect of equivalent gain. Effective messaging uses both. Most business marketing only describes success. Here's what your life looks like when you work with us. That's half the picture. The other half — what does your life look like if you don't solve this problem? — is often more motivating than the success picture because loss aversion runs deeper than desire. Miller's instruction: paint both pictures explicitly. What failure looks like if they don't act. What success looks like when they do. Both need to be specific, vivid, and connected to the internal problem — not just the external one.

> **MY TAKE — STEVE CORY**
>
> This is the teaching point that makes some business owners uncomfortable because painting the failure picture feels manipulative. I'd argue the opposite. If the cost of inaction is real — and for most business problems, it is — naming it honestly is a service, not a tactic. The owner who doesn't understand their visibility problem isn't wrong to feel fine about it. They just don't yet know what it's costing them. Showing them that picture isn't manipulation. It's honesty.

KEY PRINCIPLES

- People move away from pain faster than they move toward pleasure. Use both directions.
- The failure picture: what does their business look like if this problem continues unsolved?
- The success picture: what becomes possible when they solve it?
- Both pictures must connect to the internal problem — not just the external circumstances.

THE BIG IDEA / IN THE AUTHOR'S WORDS

If you don't talk about the cost of inaction, you are removing one of the most powerful motivators available to you. People move away from pain faster than they move toward pleasure.

— Donald Miller, paraphrased

YOUR MOVE

Write two specific paragraphs: one describing the cost of inaction for your ideal client, one describing their situation after working with you. Make both vivid and specific. Use them in your next sales conversation.

HONEST QUESTION

Does your current marketing make the cost of inaction as clear and specific as the benefit of action — or does it only paint the success picture and hope that's enough?

LESSON 06 OF 10

06 Empathy before authority

The guide earns credibility through a specific sequence: empathy first, authority second. Not the other way around. The business that leads with credentials — here's our track record, here's what we've built, here's how long we've been doing this — before acknowledging the client's struggle has skipped the most important step. The client hasn't yet felt understood. And a client who doesn't feel understood isn't ready to trust your authority, regardless of how legitimate it is. Empathy is the trust prerequisite. Once the client feels that you genuinely understand their problem — not just intellectually but experientially — they become receptive to the authority that follows. Without empathy first, authority reads as arrogance. With empathy first, authority reads as qualification. People don't buy when they understand you. They buy when they feel understood by you.

> **MY TAKE — STEVE CORY**
>
> In a community-focused market like Bedford and Rutherford County, this sequence matters more than in almost any other market I've been in. Relationships here are built on feeling known and respected, not impressed. The business owner who leads with empathy before authority isn't being soft — they're being strategically accurate about how trust gets built in this particular culture.

KEY PRINCIPLES

- Empathy first: I understand your problem and why it's frustrating.
- Authority second: here's the evidence that I can solve it.
- Empathy without authority is sympathy. It doesn't close the sale.
- Authority without empathy is arrogance. It doesn't build trust.

THE BIG IDEA / IN THE AUTHOR'S WORDS

Before a customer believes you can solve their problem, they need to know that you understand it. Empathy is not a soft skill in marketing. It is the trust prerequisite.

— Donald Miller, paraphrased

YOUR MOVE

Rewrite your positioning statement. Lead with the client's problem and your genuine understanding of it. Follow with your authority. Compare the new version to how you currently open sales conversations and notice which one lands differently.

HONEST QUESTION

In your sales conversations, do you spend more time establishing that you understand the client's problem or that you're qualified to solve it — and which one builds trust faster in your experience?

LESSON 07 OF 10

07 The one-liner: four components, one sentence

Miller's one-liner is the most portable piece of marketing a business can own. One sentence that contains four components: the character (who you serve), the problem (what they struggle with), the plan (how you help), and the success (what their life looks like after). When all four are present, the sentence does the work of a paragraph. It immediately tells the right person: this is for me. And it tells everyone else: this is not for you — which is equally valuable. The one-liner is the answer to the networking question, the social media bio, the website subheadline, the elevator pitch. When it's right, the right people lean in. When it's wrong or absent, every conversation has to start from scratch.

> **MY TAKE — STEVE CORY**
>
> I've found the one-liner to be one of the most useful tests of whether a business's positioning is actually clear or just feels clear internally. Most owners think they know what they do and who they serve. The one-liner exercise reveals whether that clarity translates into language a stranger can immediately understand. The response you get when you say it out loud — the lean in or the polite nod — is real-time market research.

KEY PRINCIPLES

- Character + problem + plan + success = the one-liner.

- When it's right, the right person immediately thinks: that's for me.
- The one-liner is the most testable piece of marketing you will ever write.
- If someone asks what you do and you need more than one sentence, the positioning isn't clear yet.

THE BIG IDEA / IN THE AUTHOR'S WORDS

If you cannot say what you do in one sentence that makes the right person feel immediately understood, your marketing is doing extra work it should not have to do.

— Donald Miller, paraphrased

YOUR MOVE

Write your one-liner using the four components: character, problem, plan, success. Say it out loud. Then say it to the next person who asks what you do. Watch their face. The response tells you if it's working.

HONEST QUESTION

Could you hand your one-liner to a stranger on the street and have them immediately understand exactly who you help, what problem you solve, and what result you produce?

LESSON 08 OF 10

08 The website wireframe: clarity over beauty

Miller provides a proven website structure based on the StoryBrand script. Seven sections, each with one job: the header (what you offer and who it's for), the stakes (what's at risk), the value proposition (what you uniquely provide), the guide section (empathy and authority), the plan (three clear steps), the call to action (direct and transitional), and the success and failure contrast. The sequence follows the structure of every story humans are wired to respond to. It's not a template in the design sense. It's a structure based on how human attention actually moves through information — what questions arise in what order, and what needs to be answered before the next question becomes relevant. The most important principle: clarity is the requirement. Beauty is a bonus.

> **MY TAKE — STEVE CORY**
>
> Most small business websites I've encountered fail the grunt test — the idea that a cave person should be able to understand in five seconds what the business offers and who it's for. Most websites are built to impress rather than to communicate. The StoryBrand wireframe fixes that by forcing one job per section and refusing to let any section do more than that one thing clearly.

KEY PRINCIPLES

- Every section of the wireframe has one job. When it performs that job clearly, the page works.
- The header must pass the grunt test: five seconds to understand what you offer and who it's for.
- Clarity is the requirement. Beauty is the bonus. Most websites reverse this priority.
- The wireframe works because it follows how human attention actually moves — not how designers prefer to arrange information.

THE BIG IDEA / IN THE AUTHOR'S WORDS

Your website does not need to be beautiful. It needs to be clear. Beauty is a bonus. Clarity is the requirement.

— Donald Miller, paraphrased

YOUR MOVE

Audit your website against the seven sections. For each one, ask: is its single job being performed clearly? Identify the weakest section and rewrite it this week — not redesign it, rewrite it.

HONEST QUESTION

If a stranger landed on your website homepage with no prior knowledge of your business, could they understand in five seconds what you do, who you do it for, and what to do next?

LESSON 09 OF 10

09 StoryBrand is a filter for every communication

The StoryBrand framework isn't a website tool. It isn't a copywriting technique. It's a communication filter that applies to every piece of outgoing communication — every email, every social post, every sales conversation, every proposal. The filter is a single question applied to everything: does this center the customer as the hero, or does it center us? When this question becomes habitual — when it's applied before every piece of content goes out, before every sales conversation begins, before every proposal is sent — the cumulative effect on trust-building is significant. Consistent clarity across all touchpoints compounds the same way habits do.

> **MY TAKE — STEVE CORY**
>
> The businesses that fully internalize this framework stop thinking about marketing as a separate discipline and start thinking about communication as a unified practice. Every touchpoint is an opportunity to either confirm or erode the client's sense that you understand them. The StoryBrand filter applied consistently makes every one of those touchpoints a confirmation.

KEY PRINCIPLES

- Filter every communication: is the customer the hero, or are we?
- Does this clarify or confuse? Clarity is always the goal.

- Consistent clarity across all touchpoints builds trust faster than any advertising spend.
- The framework is most powerful when it stops being a tool and becomes a habit of thought.

THE BIG IDEA / IN THE AUTHOR'S WORDS

Clarity is not a marketing strategy. It is a respect for the customer's time. When you communicate clearly, you are telling the customer that you understand they have better things to do than decode your message.

— Donald Miller, paraphrased

YOUR MOVE

Apply the StoryBrand filter to your next email or social post before it goes out. Ask three questions: who is the hero? Is the problem clear? Is there an explicit CTA? Revise until all three are yes.

HONEST QUESTION

If someone reviewed the last ten pieces of communication that went out from your business, would they consistently find the client at the center — or would they find your brand at the center more often than not?

LESSON 10 OF 10

10 The guide with scars: your experience is your authority

Miller's most personally relevant teaching for anyone who has been in business long enough to accumulate real experience: the most powerful authority a guide can carry is not credentials. It's relevant experience. The guide who has faced the same problem the hero is facing — who has been in the difficult position, made the mistakes, found the path through, and came back to show others — is more credible than any degree or award. Because credentials prove you studied the problem. Experience proves you survived it. The scars are not a liability. They are the credential. The story you most want to leave out of your marketing — the failure, the hard year, the lesson that cost you something real — is often the story that would most powerfully establish your authority with the exact client you're trying to reach.

> **MY TAKE — STEVE CORY**
>
> This is the principle the entire Ignite community is built around. Not credentials. Not theory. Not a framework borrowed from someone else's experience. The wisdom that comes from having been in the room when things went wrong and finding the way out. That's what the guide with scars offers. And it's the one thing that can't be faked, bought, or shortcut. It has to be lived.

KEY PRINCIPLES

- Credentials tell the client you studied the problem. Experience tells them you survived it.
- The guide doesn't teach theory. They share what actually worked — and what didn't.
- The story you most want to leave out is often the most powerful trust-building asset you have.
- You're not the answer. You're the evidence. That's the guide with scars in one sentence.

THE BIG IDEA / IN THE AUTHOR'S WORDS

The most powerful thing a guide can say is not 'I have the answer.' It is 'I have been where you are, and I found the way through. Let me show you.'

— Donald Miller, paraphrased

YOUR MOVE

Write down the most relevant business scar you carry from your years of ownership. The mistake, the hard season, the lesson that cost you something real. That story — told with honesty and without embellishment — is your most powerful positioning asset. Start using it.

HONEST QUESTION

Are you leading with the polished version of your experience — the wins, the credentials, the success stories — when the harder, more honest story might be the one that actually builds the most trust?

CLOSING

One last thing

Miller ends the book with a reminder that stays with me: clarity is a form of respect. When you

communicate clearly, you're telling the client that you understand they have better things to do than

decode your message.

Most marketing asks the client to work too hard. To figure out what you do, who it's for, why it matters,

and what to do next. StoryBrand removes that work. It hands the client a clear path and says: if this

sounds like you, here's the next step.

The guide with scars doesn't need to be impressive. They need to be clear, honest, and useful. That's the entire job.

IN THE AUTHOR'S WORDS

"You're not the answer. You're the evidence. That's the guide with scars."

— Steve Cory

WHAT'S NEXT IN THE LIBRARY

W H AT ' S N E X T I N T H E L I B R A RY Start with Why → by Simon Sinek StoryBrand clarifies your message. Start with Why helps you find the belief underneath it.

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