

## Story boards

Selling the telling of our lives.

BY MARK WILLIAMS

*The Entertainment Economy*  
How Mega-Media Forces Are  
Transforming Our Lives  
By Michael J. Wolf  
314 pages, \$25  
Times Books

*The Dream Society*  
How the Coming Shift from  
Information to Imagination Will  
Transform Your Business  
By Rolf Jensen  
242 pages, \$25  
McGraw-Hill

"**D**EAR MEDIA professional"—or "Dear business journalist"—the press releases begin. They go on to announce books like *Angels in the Workplace*, *How to Be a Star at Work*, and *Spirited Leading and Learning: Process Wisdom for a New Age* (in which "a leading thinker and pioneer in management development who coined the term 'permanent white water' shares his gifted insights and wisdom on life, work, and organizational transformation"). These letters head straight to the circular file. Recently, I was blasted with emails about some new indispensable book outlining the importance of entertainment industry strategies to the marketing world. This actually rang a bell. For one thing, it's this month's hot trend in the business book genre. For another, there's substance beneath this particular froth.

In our world of expanding con-

sumer choices, competitors are a mouse-click away, and one of them will probably undercut your prices. Your edge has to be that you're selling an "experience." Perhaps it's a buying experience, in a store resembling, say, a theme park. Or maybe the experience is one of ownership: possessing a certain product, you'll tell a certain story about what kind of person you are. Though our human identities have always been constructed from the stories we remember about ourselves, in this media-driven era we increasingly script our lives as we believe our optimal self—the inner celebrity destined for talk shows and movies—would.

### THE TRITE STUFF

It's a schizophrenic way to pass through life, even for real celebrities, as O.J. Simpson's farewell letter (written before his Ford Bronco tour of Los Angeles's freeways) pathetically reveals: "Please think of the real O.J. and not this lost person." Nevertheless, Hollywood conditions much of our lives as producers and as consumers. With such trite musings in mind, I picked up *The Entertainment Economy* by Michael J. Wolf. The author photo shows a blow-dried smoothy wearing a black turtleneck and a frozen smile. This was the founder and senior partner, the bio says, of the media and entertainment

division of the consultancy Booz-Allen & Hamilton. ("Michael J. Wolf, the industry's most in-demand strategist...his team of more than 200 consultants are based in New York, Los Angeles, London, Paris, Tokyo, Munich, Shanghai, São Paulo...blah blah blah...") So this wasn't the Michael Wolff who wrote *Burn Rate*, or the one who was Arsenio Hall's bandleader. Too bad; they're both much funnier.

As I read Mr. Wolf's introduction ("Suits versus creatives was the old model. I feel that creative suits is the new one"), my heart sank. "Just as shoppers have come to expect milk producers to add vitamin D to their product, consumers are looking for the E-factor in every product...that's E as in Entertainment." Wow. Mr. Wolf elaborates: "California officials estimate that for every job lost in aerospace the local economy gained two in entertainment, leading to an 83 percent growth in that sector since the end of the Cold War."

That's Mr. Wolf's most original riff: confronted by the end of the cold war and Pentagon spending, America filled the economic void with "entertainmentization." As evidence, he claims that in Los Angeles, "defense assembly lines have been replaced by 14 soundstages for film and video production...the annual net gain...in the local economy has been nearly \$20 billion."

Thanks to *TV Guide* and our PalmPilots, he says, we now "see our lives the way television executives see their week: as a series of little boxes that need to be filled." Well, if you're running



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around taking meetings for next season's programming, life may feel like that. It doesn't if you're a software developer on a death march to project deadline, or a building contractor finishing a roof before the rains come. Maybe—like a frog's specialized eyes, registering only the motions of flies, or doggy awareness, deciphering the world in terms of interesting smells—only certain sensory cues reach the media executive's consciousness. The amazing thing about Mr. Wolf's book is that it goes on for more than 300 pages about things like branding and the fun-focused consumer, then concludes that "the most valued commodity is the human imagination."

## OUR STORIES, OURSELVES

If Mr. Wolf's book were a crime thriller, it would be a Grisham or Clancy knockoff, produced after movie rights had been sold. If it were science

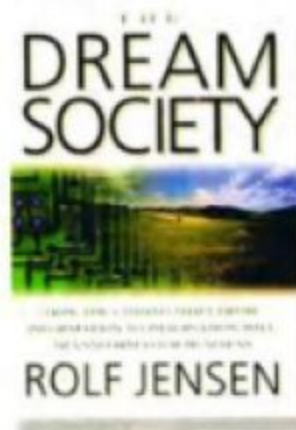
fiction, it would be a media franchise tie-in. Rolf Jensen's *The Dream Society: How the Coming Shift from Information to Imagination Will Transform Your Business*, in contrast, would be that nifty philosophical sci-fi novel whose ideas later expand in your mind. Mr. Jensen is director of the Copenhagen Institute for Future Studies. His photo reveals a slightly moon-faced man, with a pleasant grin and unfashionably cut hair perhaps less than a decade short of becoming a comb-over.

Mr. Jensen writes that in a meeting with two big clients, a telecommunications firm and a bank, one asked, "What comes after the Information Society?" Mr. Jensen and his colleagues debated the question. Clearly, the progress of the developed countries' present social order will mean its pass-

ing. The automation of everything automatable will continue; much work now done by human intelligence and senses will be turned over to machines. Indeed, this will happen more quickly than most people realize.

Mr. Jensen cites small instances that he thinks represent the next social order. In Denmark, free-range eggs have won over half the market; consumers pay an additional 15 to 20 percent for them. The Danish, Mr. Jensen comments, "are willing to pay more for the story about animal ethics, about rustic romanticism,

about the good old days." The English AGA stove, precisely because it's undergone no product development since 1926, sells for between \$10,000 and \$15,000. The company's customers, its marketing manager says,



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"want family life, and AGA is at the center of that wish."

Mr. Jensen points out that today, the bulk of the globalized story market remains in the sports industry, which presents tales of dedication, difficulties surmounted, competition, and success. (Hence NBC's purchase, for \$3.6 billion, of broadcast rights to the Olympic Games until 2008.)

But in the 21st century, Mr. Jensen speculates, just as Western scientists currently search the Amazon rain forest for plant products useful to pharmaceutical corporations, so corporate researchers will travel far from home. "Their objective will be to buy myths from the natives....Let us entertain the thought that in 2025, Greenland's main export will be legends and fairy tales; that Australia's primary product industry will have been surpassed by aborigines selling their legends....Though Hollywood is today's undisputed world leader in story merchandising, it still

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needs more and better material for its movies." Initially, this seems pretty fanciful. Yet, I realized, what else are *Pocahontas* and *Mulan*?

How would 21st-century companies look? Mr. Jensen suggests that a CEO would be a storyteller in chief, more concerned with the enterprise's vision than with the specifics of strategy. And though corporations pay only lip service today to the idea that their greatest asset is their employees, it's likely that, as computerization frees up

employees for creative tasks, a company's ability to attract high-quality personnel will become the critical factor in its success. Rather than finding their workloads diminishing, people may find their jobs more involved, more time-consuming, as their companies increasingly resemble the shared-value communities of our hunter-gatherer past.

Perhaps surprisingly, Mr. Jensen's writing is adroit and to the point. His ideas seem impossibly imaginative, of course—until you consider how a society might look when it has achieved such productive efficiency and superior artificial intelligence that material goods abound. Which products and services would still be in demand, generating competitive markets? Probably those that meet our need for meaning, purpose, historical context, and excitement: we are, after all, our stories. 🍷

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