Miller, Donald

Building a StoryBrand 2.0

15. Principle Six: Help Customers Avoid Failure (Negative Stakes)

This chapter argues that a message needs stakes to hold attention, the same way a story does. Just as a story keeps an audience by showing what awful thing might befall the hero, a brand keeps customers by naming clearly what they stand to lose if they don't act. Without stakes, there is no story and no urgency.

Key takeaways

- Stories grip us by dangling both a possible success and a possible tragic ending; a brand must do the same by showing what the customer could lose.
- The two motives that move any hero: run from something bad or move toward something good. Naming the 'bad' creates urgency.
- Allstate's 'Mayhem' campaign works by agitating a real fear (burglary, disaster) and then offering the product as the escape.
- Loss aversion is real: Kahneman's research shows people are 2-3 times more motivated to avoid a loss than to gain the same amount.

- Use a simple 'fear appeal': show the reader they're vulnerable, tell them to act, give a specific action, then challenge them to take it.
- Fear is salt, not the main dish. Too much doom shuts people down; too little leaves them unmoved. Most people use far too little.
- Pairing a warning with an offer of rescue turns a negative message into a hopeful one — the darker the story, the brighter the ending.
- Practical step: list at least three negative consequences your customer avoids by choosing you (lost money, health risk, wasted time, missed opportunity).

Passages worth keeping

> *"Remember, if there are no stakes in the story, there is no story."*

The core reason a message must name what's at risk.

> *"The darker the story gets, the brighter the light is at the end of the tunnel."*

Why naming the negative makes the solution feel more hopeful, not less.