

# The Narrative That Changes Everything

An inside look at the  
process of building a  
strategic narrative



THE STORIED FUTURE

**Discover what a strategic narrative is, why it's critical to your success, and how we created a new narrative to help Applicate Commerce, a 60-year-old paint distributor, overcome disruption, resolve channel conflict, and deliver greater value by aligning their employees, suppliers, and retail customers around a shared vision of the future—a future where they all have **a chance to win together.****



## INTRODUCTION

# Strategic narrative: a shared vision of the future

Has your organization reached a place where the path that brought you here won't take you where you want to go? Maybe your industry has fundamentally shifted. Perhaps your customers' buying habits have changed. Or maybe you're navigating digital transformation, a merger, or a pivot.

Regardless, you'll need a roadmap that's true to your company's values and history, while also acting as a center of gravity, anchored in the future, that propels your organization and your customers toward a world defined by new levels of value creation, growth, and transformation.

A strategic narrative [include italics] is a framework that aligns everyone from the buyer to the boardroom around an irresistible vision of the future. It's led by your CEO, grounded in your business strategy and the realities of the market,

and fueled by the energy and matter that come from the stories, experiences, and insights of customers, partners, employees, and your leadership team.

In 2021, the leadership team at Applicate Commerce engaged The Storied Future to help them address some significant challenges in their industry—challenges that could only be solved with a new narrative. Fast forward to 2022, and Applicate was kind enough to sit down with us and share their story from start to finish so you can have a clear picture of the "Why" and the "How" of strategic narrative, and to demonstrate how strategic narrative can help you align everyone from your buyers to your employees, partners, and leadership around an actionable vision of the future. This is their story.

## A shifting industry

Applicate Commerce is an innovative distribution company based in Kirkland, WA, who's recently been making waves in the applied architectural products industry.

As the president and CEO of Applicate Commerce, Andrew Walsh was at the helm of one of the biggest shifts in the company's sixty-year history. The company—previously known as Paint Sundries Solutions—had stayed in their lane for decades as a distributor of applied architectural products. But the rise of eCommerce was an external force that was disrupting their linear supply chain, threatening the market share of brands and local retailers, and training consumers to increasingly demand more, better, faster, and cheaper.

Andrew and his executive team knew they needed to change or get left behind.

They had restructured the company into three business units under one umbrella: distribution to retailers (PSS), delivery of eCommerce services to brands (Applicate Services), and—the unit that raised the eyebrows of some of their supply chain partners—their own eCommerce (PaintSupply.com).

Andrew knew the move to begin selling direct through [PaintSupply.com](https://www.paintsupply.com) was absolutely the right call, but some of the

company's partners were nervous. Their retailer customers were unsure if (or how) it might affect them, their manufacturing partners weren't sure how the move would help them, and even Applicate Commerce employees were having trouble communicating this change in a consistent way.

For every one-on-one conversation Andrew and his team were having to explain the move to their partners, he knew others were whirling around out of their control. How many conversations were happening outside his office? How many discussions were spinning off at conferences and on forums? How many of Applicate Commerce's own salespeople could tell the right story, and tell it effectively, when they were inevitably asked to explain? And what was the right story, anyway?

Instead of putting out fires one at a time, Applicate Commerce needed a narrative strong enough to shape the conversation throughout the entire industry—and not just because they wanted to talk about themselves. They wanted to start, and lead, a conversation that would serve as a road map to help their partners succeed in this shifting world, too. That was when one of our partners, [UpTop](#), suggested Andrew call The Storied Future to see if we could help.



**Andrew Walsh**  
*President and CEO*



**John Mittenthal**  
*Executive Vice  
President*



**Shawn Fernandez**  
*Senior Vice President  
of Sales & Service*



**David Wenger**  
*Senior Vice  
President of  
Operations*

## The realities for Applicate Commerce's audiences

We'll get into the "How" of the process, but let's start with an overview of the forces and challenges facing each of the players in Applicate Commerce's industry. Working with Andrew and his team, we boiled it down to the following summary.

The rise of eCommerce has created a battleground where manufacturers, distributors, and retailers are caught up in a collective fight. A fight for attention. A fight for wallets. A fight for loyalty. They have a fraction of a second to capture a customer's attention and convince them to put a product into their physical or online cart. And if they don't show up in the right place in the right way at the right time, they will lose the click, lose the cart, lose market share, and could lose the future.



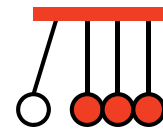
### Manufacturers

- eCommerce makes it extremely difficult for manufacturers to manage the integrity of their brands and product prices, as their products are sold across numerous web sites and marketplaces
- Getting their full range of products in the hands of as many customers as possible requires them to navigate disparate specialty markets and regional differences



### Retailers

- eCommerce is challenging brick-and-mortar retail businesses, making it difficult for many of them to stay competitive
- Many retailers aren't sure where to start with eCommerce, and it can be hard to meet customer demand for new trends like buy online, pick-up in store



### Employees

- eCommerce eats into commissions of a sales team traditionally focused on brick-and-mortar sales
- Consolidation of Applicate Commerce's competitors has often resulted in the distributor cutting out the sales force by going direct

As you can see, the rise of eCommerce has impacted nearly every aspect of how Applicate Commerce conducts its business. The company and its employees could stand on the sidelines, holding on to the old ways of doing things and watching these forces chip away at their business. Or, they could jump into the fray with their business partners to create a future where everyone can thrive, together. They chose the latter.

# Strategic narrative emerges from your core

Andrew Walsh started working at Applicate Commerce at the age of sixteen. At the time, he thought it would just be a summer job, but he came to love the products, the industry, and the values of the company. One day, in Andrew's first few months, the founder of Applicate Commerce walked into the warehouse and asked him what he was doing.

Andrew had been wiping down five-gallon canisters of stain before they were packed to send to a retailer. Afterwards, he'd planned on sweeping the floor. Both jobs that didn't seem that important. Andrew had only been working in the warehouse a few weeks—nothing about his job was particularly glamorous.

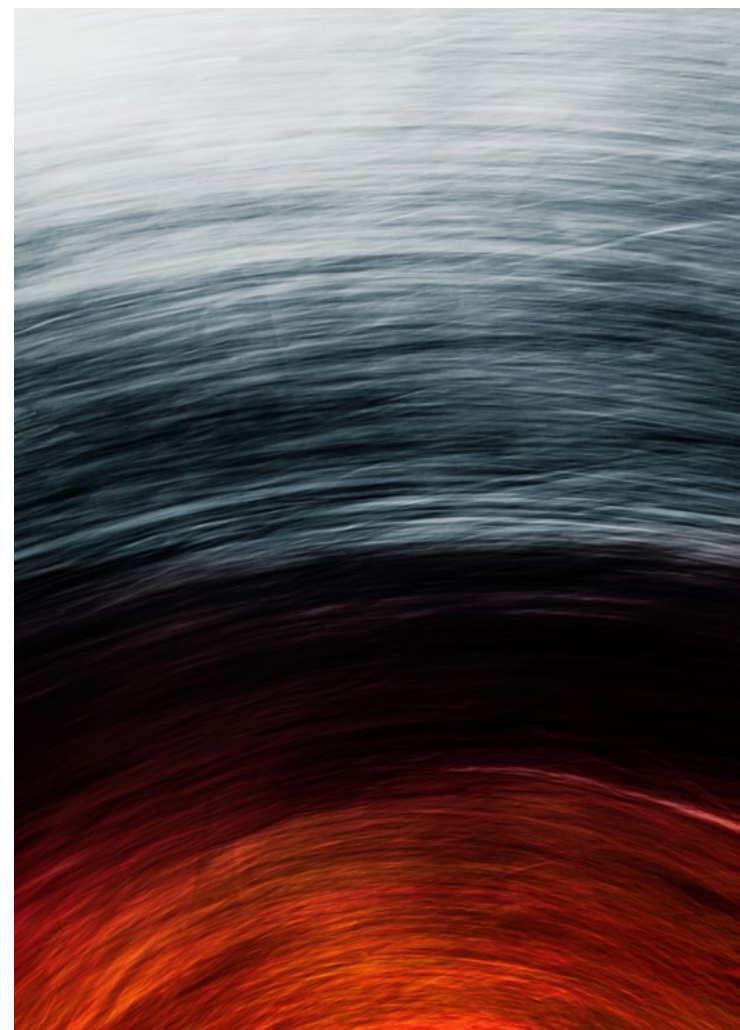
As Andrew recalls, the founder spent fifteen minutes explaining exactly how such small jobs helped the entire company succeed. By wiping down the canisters, Andrew was making sure the product that got shipped out looked great, and the customer could put it right

onto their shelves, saving them time. By sweeping the floor, he was ensuring that the people who worked in the warehouse felt good about where they worked.

"He connected for me how what I was doing at an entry level job was directly contributing to the collective success," said Andrew. "I was hooked. I was empowered."

This moment also taught Andrew one of the company's most important values: everything each employee did—down to the tiniest detail—should create more value for their customers.

Andrew carried that lesson with him as he advanced through the company, and those values have shaped how Applicate Commerce has adapted to the changing realities of the distribution industry over the years. Their goal in restructuring the company was as much about their own bottom line as being a better partner to their manufacturer and retailer customers, innovating and creating abundant value for their partners.



# Atomic Stories

Those magic moments of discovery and insight, frustration and delight, curiosity and transformation, that will fuel your journey to the future.

## **Atomic stories are the fuel for strategic narrative**

The most powerful strategic narratives are those that are grounded in strong company values. But reading a mission statement on a company's *About Us* page isn't enough when it comes to truly understanding those values—which is why The Storied Future begins every engagement by mining for atomic stories.

We started with one-on-one interviews with the executive team, data, and eCommerce specialists. Then, we started

exploring and asking lots of questions as we walked up and down the aisles of Applicate Commerce's Kirkland distribution center to see how they pick inventory, wrap pallets, and ship orders. With every conversation, we dug deep to uncover atomic stories—like the one Andrew told us about wiping down cans of stain in the warehouse—that illustrate exactly what the company stands for, how their business operates now, how it might grow in the future, and what makes it stand out. These atomic stories, and the insights we gathered, gave us

the fuel we needed to start crafting a strategic narrative that emerges from and is supported by those values.

As Andrew had learned in his first weeks of work, this is a company that doesn't believe in phoning in even the smallest details. Our approach is much the same. That meant our work was cut out for us as we aimed to create an authentic strategic narrative that could propel them, and their industry, toward a massive new future.

**If you look at our business over the years, we've continued to grow and create and understand innovation by mining what we're good at, at our core. And I love that. It strengthens you from your core."**

Andrew Walsh, President and CEO,  
Applicate Commerce

# Strategic narrative is fueled by your customers, your employees, and your leadership



Dave Wenger has seen his share of conflict. Applicate Commerce launched PaintSupply.com in response to the way massive online retailers had disrupted their industry, but that launch created additional channel conflict. But if anyone in this industry understands how the various channels can work together, it's Dave.

During college, Dave ran his own company painting houses. Until, that is, he painted the house of an Applicate Commerce employee who talked him into applying for an open sales position. In his new role, Dave traveled throughout the greater Puget Sound region in Washington State, writing orders and helping retailers merchandise their paint departments. He eventually took a hiatus from distribution to work for a manufacturer in the industry before returning to Applicate Commerce.

Now, as Applicate Commerce's Senior Vice President of Operations, he has a holistic view of what's possible when all the players in the supply chain work together successfully—from the manufacturer to mom-and-pop hardware store to the entrepreneur in college with a paintbrush in their hand.

In this industry, Dave says, nothing demonstrates trustworthiness more than integrity and transparency around pricing. "I can talk about having the greatest selection, the fastest turnaround, the best packaging and fantastic training and product assortment and all these things that we do that add value to the supply chain," he said. "But if there's not integrity in pricing, you lose trust."

## How could we help everyone win?

Given how retailers feel increasing pressure from their in-store customers turning to online shopping on sites like Amazon, Dave understands retailers' questions. But he also knows Appicate Commerce is absolutely committed to its retailer-partners' success. Appicate Commerce believes brick and mortar retailers can win in an era shaped by eCommerce, and that their success is critical to that of the entire supply chain. Why? Because of the timeless, functional, and physical value they provide.

It would be easy for a company in Appicate Commerce's position to take a defensive or winner-take-all approach.

But their values and their business model inspired them to create a narrative and a future where everyone in the supply chain has an opportunity to win. Even as the industry was shifting, the company

refused to budge on the values that their partners had learned to trust.

Here are some of the practical ways they felt they could accomplish this:

- Empowering their manufacturers to reach new end users, while also helping them show up consistently with countless brands and products across over a hundred online marketplaces
- Educating and inspiring retailers to embrace eCommerce by enabling abilities like buy online, pick-up in store
- Removing headaches for frustrated specialty consumers such as those working in maintenance, repair, and operations (MRO), by giving them access to the products they needed to do their jobs

## Insights help shape strategic narrative

To create a strategic narrative that would speak to stakeholders in every link of the supply chain, The Storied Future dug deep to understand the points of view, wants, fears, and needs of these disparate audiences.



- Dove deep into understanding their business model
- Used our Atomic Storytelling process to surface the energy and matter that can only come from the audience
- Uncovered exactly what they were hearing from their customers
- Analyzed competitor creative and messaging
- Distilled all of this into insights and themes
- Used pattern matching to analyze the overlap between the goals of each audience

**"We honor our brick-and-mortar retailers by recognizing the tangible value they are adding to the supply chain, which we primarily demonstrate through our online product-pricing strategies. That allows us to create an eCommerce strategy that keeps things in balance, and evolves side-by-side with retailers without disruption."**

Dave Wenger, SVP of Operations, Applicate Commerce



## NARRATIVE TERRITORIES

# Strategic narrative plants your flag in the sand

Shawn Fernandez thrives on change. Like Andrew and Dave, Shawn has worked at Applicate Commerce for almost all his career, eventually taking the role of Senior Vice President of Sales & Service. Despite his longevity with the company, Shawn finds that every day at the office brings a new challenge—especially given how rapidly the industry is changing.

Few of the traditional retail stores Shawn talks to have an online presence—and fewer have invested the time necessary to learn all the complexities around online retail. While there are still plenty of customers who prefer to walk into a retail store, many customers are taking advantage of the abundance of other options such as online and mobile ordering, whether they have the items delivered or prefer to pick them up in the store.

It's why Shawn felt more strongly than ever that Applicate Commerce needed a powerful rallying cry. All these customers

needed to know that their partner was going to bat for them, to help them become more competitive in the changing eCommerce landscape, and to thrive in the face of a significant threat to their traditional business model(s).

### **Crafting narrative territories**

After mining Applicate's atomic stories, and distilling all of the insights, The Storied Future used all of these inputs to craft three distinct narrative territories. Each of these three territories were rooted in Applicate Commerce's values and history while pushing a bold vision that spoke to all three of their audiences: manufacturer partners, retailer customers, and the company's own employees.

We then presented the drafts to the company owner with Andrew. The owner's response demonstrated exactly why Applicate Commerce has thrived in uncertainty for over six decades.



"This narrative needs to be so aggressive that twenty-two people in the industry think we're genius and two thousand think we're insane," he said.

Okay. Not a problem. Actually, that was a scary ask, but scary often inspires creativity and that was the feedback we needed. Fortunately, we had all the raw material we needed to go even bigger with the narrative, so it didn't take long to come back with the bolder narrative that they were looking for. A strategic narrative that could be a rallying cry not just within the company, but for an entire industry. A rallying cry that would align each of their audiences around a shared vision of the future. A vision that Applicate Commerce was uniquely positioned to bring to life.

### **Making the strategic narrative actionable**

Once Applicate Commerce had decided on a narrative territory, we used that to craft the final strategic narrative.

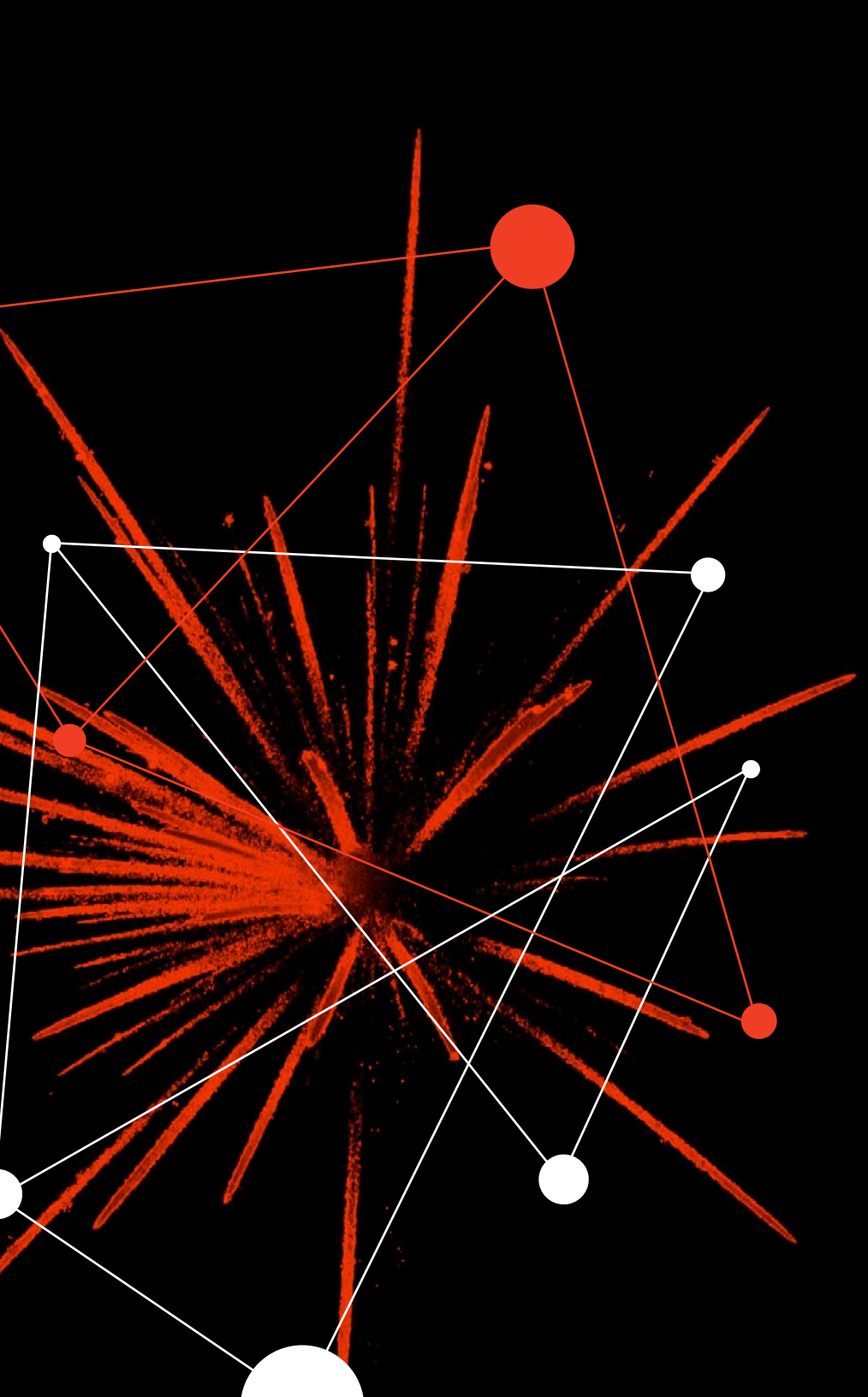
A strategic narrative has to be flexible and detailed enough to guide an hours-long conversation with manufacturers, shape a 30-second conversation in an elevator, inspire prospective employees to join the company, transform the way finance approaches the most mundane tasks, and redefine the way everyone from the boardroom to fulfillment centers to retailers speak and think. And that's exactly what we created through countless sessions working, refining, and testing it out in the real world.

But we didn't stop at telling a good story. It's not good enough to build a narrative—you have to activate it.

With the strategic narrative in hand, we built out strategies, tactics, and messaging frameworks to help Applicate Commerce ensure the narrative would take hold and drive true change.

To advance Applicate's narrative, we created a 90+ slide deck with all the insights we'd uncovered throughout the engagement, along with a 15-slide story deck that could be used to effectively communicate the narrative to every one of Applicate Commerce's audiences. We also delivered messaging frameworks and activation strategies to help the team bring their strategic narrative to life with each audience.

And the one thing they all had in common? Every deck, every messaging framework, every story slide, and every activation strategy could be boiled down to one phrase, a single rallying cry that every audience could rally around: *Win the Cart.*



**Our strategic narrative is a great tool for us to clearly articulate where we're going and why. It gives every member of our team the confidence to talk to our business partners in a clear, honest and consistent manner."**

Shawn Fernandez, SVP of Sales & Service,  
Applicate Commerce

## STRATEGIC NARRATIVE

# Strategic narrative inspires action

The metaphorical paint had barely dried on Applicate Commerce's new strategic narrative when Andrew, Shawn, and Dave sat down with one of their biggest manufacturers to share how the company's new business model was going to help them all succeed.

The narrative Andrew told them hooked them right off the bat. It spoke to the realities of the supply chain disruption that the entire applied architectural products industry is living through, where eCommerce has blown up the linear supply chain and the stakes have never been higher.

Andrew went on to explain that manufacturers, distributors, and retailers are caught up in a fight for survival, with only a fraction of a second to capture the customer's attention—whether online or in the paint aisle. "Win the Cart" was a rallying cry, speaking to the one thing that would bring everyone in the industry together: connecting more products with more customers in a way that helped

every one of Applicate Commerce's partners win, too.

- For retailers, Win the Cart means tapping into Applicate Commerce's paint department expertise to capture the attention of distracted shoppers in the store, and online.
- For manufacturers, Win the Cart means partnering with Applicate Commerce to expand their distribution in innovative ways and reach more audiences than ever before.
- For Applicate Commerce's employees, Win the Cart means doubling down on the company's values of detail-oriented service, honoring their partners, innovation, and creating value every step of the way.

Andrew later told The Storied Future that after the meeting, one of the manufacturer's executive team took Andrew aside and said,





"Your strategy is the most aggressive we've seen in our industry. It's spot-on and in your face. We love it."

"I was encouraged," Andrew said. "We had spent years talking about our strategies in a way that was comfortable for our audiences, but we needed to be more aggressive, more clear. We want to be a change agent in our industry, and we have the chops and the credibility to do it."

As a result of taking their strategic narrative on the road, Applicate Commerce has begun developing new, non-traditional partnerships with their manufacturing partners to help them get their products to more market segments and channels than ever before, while maintaining a consistent representation of their brand.

Applicate Commerce also shared the narrative in person at their five different distribution centers throughout the US, and Shawn recalled how energized employees were after hearing it. "Whether you're working in the warehouse or in sales, in our home office or three thousand miles from here, you understand the direction we're going," he said. This new shared vision has created a stronger company and given their team more confidence to talk to customers.

## **Harness the power of your own strategic narrative**

At The Storied Future, we believe your strategic narrative should be an irresistible center of gravity that propels your customers, partners, employees, and leadership toward a shared future. It should be a fiercely inspiring and urgent call to action—a vision powerful enough that it animates every part of your organization from operations to marketing to HR, and aligns every member of your team, from your frontline customer service staff to your C-suite.

This happens because your strategic narrative isn't a story you cut out of whole cloth. It's not one that any other company in the world could adopt. It is a powerful energy source that emerges from your values, serves your customers, and crystalizes your company's unique rallying cry into a strategic narrative so compelling it inspires action.

**To learn more about how Applicate Commerce is using strategic narrative to win the cart, check out [The Storied Future Podcast](#). Or visit [The Storied Future](#) for additional stories, insights, and inspiration to help you change the future of your business.**

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