

Good story-telling advice from a former TV news reporter

Perspective on People:
By Karen Friedman

I recently read an article predicting trends we can expect in business this year. The author said business people will start creating and telling stories to better market themselves and their companies.

The author isn't wrong. He just failed to put his prediction in context. Businesses and companies have been telling stories since the beginning of time. From cave paintings to wanderers who traveled the country to bring news to people, stories have always been a part of human interaction. Stories engage, create connections, enhance understanding and are memorable long after the facts are forgotten.

What's changed in 2015 is the way we share our stories. Today, there is no need for nomads to travel the lands to announce news. People of all ages can send texts and emails and tweets instead of waiting for letters to arrive. However, we're still telling stories to drive messages, market products and connect with people. The trend isn't more storytelling. It's using newer methods available to create even more powerful storytelling that enables professionals to reach and forge relationships with even more people in more ways than ever before.

Look no further than You Tube, Pinterest or Facebook to understand how stories are being used today. Content that includes videos, pictures

and music allow companies to quickly connect emotionally which fuels everything from buying habits to political opinions to the way you wear your hair. However, simply using digital content will not increase brand loyalty or enhance your marketing efforts. Like an old-fashioned story that keeps listeners on the edge of their seats, the way you tell your story will spell the difference between failure and success.

If you've been reading my column for a while, then you know I spent nearly two decades as a television news reporter. Reporters are storytellers. Early on we learn that for a story to be effective, it must engage all of the senses. Listeners need to see what you saw, hear what you heard, smell what you smelled and touch what you touched. They need to be part of the experience.

Good storytellers also learn that every story and example must be tailored to the audience. For example, if you're writing for a financial publication, those readers will have different interests than people reading medical publications.

Sound a bit simplistic? It is yet I couldn't even count how many times seasoned communications professionals pitched stories to me in a way that was irrelevant to my audience.



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If you want to affect behavior the quick vignettes and stories you tell should connect with people on an emotional level. If you can make people feel you can make them care. If you make them care you are better poised to drive outcomes.

Think back to your favorite teachers. What is it about them that held your attention? Chances are they engaged you with stories to create context and make lessons learned relatable. Stories are far more interesting than rattling off information.

Business is no different. Not only can you motivate customers and stakeholders, but a story your audience can identify with will help them feel more emotionally connected to the subject. John is a great example. He's a sales rep for a global company and his task was to excite current customers about a new product.

I happened to shadow John on a sales call and despite his easy to like exuberant personality, it wasn't pretty. He spent most of the time showing the client a demo on his iPad. When the client asked specific questions, instead of engaging her, he fiddled with finding the right slide on the iPad. She kept glancing at the clock on the wall and finally said "Can you give me an example of how this could benefit my employees?" John looked up, shared an example off the top of his head and a conversation ensued. She was engaged because she could visualize how his product could solve problems at her office.

Stories however should not be told just for the sake of engaging. Stories should be used to motivate, inspire action and illustrate the main message you want to share. Stories are best used when they showcase a personal experience that provides value for others.

For many years we've worked with groups of patient advocates who have heart wrenching stories to share. Their mission is to become a trusted resource for other patients with similar conditions.

In early sessions, they would share their stories without regard to outcomes. Why were they telling their stories? Could they help reduce fear and tension? Would their own story help others realize they could thrive?

Once they identified what they wanted for their listeners, their stories were message focused instead of 'me' focused.

When telling stories, start by thinking through your purpose so you know how you'll use the story to help others. When I interview people I always advise them to talk about things that only they can speak to. For example, a researcher might say 'When I looked inside the test tube I found that ...' A sales person might say "The customer told me he prefers Model A over Model B and here's why ...' These statements are unique to you and make messages memorable.

A few more storytelling tips to inspire action:

Avoid overload

You don't always have to tell your story in chronological order and you don't have to overwhelm them with too many details. Go for a balance with a three-step process. First, begin with a problem or a challenge. Next create anticipation and tension as you share some of the obstacles you faced along the way. This will evoke emotion, keep it interactive and help listeners stay vested in the story. Finally, let them know how it ended, solved a problem or where things stand now. Often they will draw their own conclusions and decide what may work best for them.

Passion and presence

Deliver your story as if you were having a conversation with a friend. If you were excited about something, you'd be animated. If you were concerned, your voice would sound more tentative. When having a conversation, our gestures, facial expressions and eye contact is natural instead of planned or stilted. Applying the same candor at work will enhance your executive presence.

Take a test drive

Storytelling takes practice. Test out your stories on trusted friends before you take them prime time. See where you get laughs or apprehensions. Watch the expressions on your listeners faces to help you learn what works and what doesn't for different audiences. Look for points in your story to create memorable lines that drive points home.

If you struggle to remember stories, try keeping a notebook. When something interesting happens, jot it down even if you don't know what message that story may offer. True stories told from personal experiences are often the best teachers. People want the real you and what better way to share what you or your business stand for than allowing them to peek inside.

