

# Marketing by Narrative

## A storytelling approach to building your brand

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### Executive Summary

- Storytelling is vital to success in the business world, but is neglected
- Storytelling involves communicating a sequence of events to an audience, and can be used to engage and influence people in almost any aspect of business
- Storytelling engages empathy and emotions in a way that facts and figures alone do not
- Good storytelling requires the use of literary techniques such as character, conflict and resolution
- When telling your firm's story, be authentic and epic

As business people, we gather around hi-def screens, desks and conference tables like cavemen once gathered around campfires. The cavemen communicated with each other, and so do we. Their methods were crude – drawings on walls, hand gestures and grunts. We, on the other hand, study line charts and talk about global economic trends.

One thing we have in common with the cavemen is that what we are doing often consists of storytelling. Where the cavemen would tell each other of a successful buffalo hunt or a battle against a rival clan, we tell stories about how our product or service solved a client's problem, or how we doubled return on investment from the prior year.

From business to politics to education to entertainment, it is usually the case that, as author Annette Simmons puts it, "the best story wins." Getting the people you want to influence to accept your narrative of the world is fundamental to success in just about any

endeavor. Communication techniques change over time, but storytelling remains.

Given this, it is amazing how underappreciated the craft of storytelling is in the business world, and how we neglect to incorporate it into our communications.

### **What it is and when to use it**

At its most basic level, storytelling means communicating a sequence of connected events to an audience. The events may be true (non-fiction) or not (fiction), but as an ethical matter the audience should know which type of story they are being told.

You may be thinking, that's fine Paul, but I am looking to grow my business, not write a novel. Granted, but whatever your job, you probably do want to engage and influence people. Story helps you do that. Storytelling can be applied to virtually any aspect of business. The following table shows some examples.

Activity	Example
Advertising	The story of how a company came to be often makes for great ad content. For instance, Wendy's restaurant chain was built up through the story of founder Dave Thomas naming the restaurant after his daughter.
Selling	Say you have a prospect on the verge of becoming a client. Telling the story of a current client, and what you did for them, might be just the thing to turn that prospect into a sale. If effective, the story can be polished into a case study for regular use by the sales force.
Managing	Motivating employees requires articulating a vision to them of how their job fits into the big picture. Storytelling is the perfect way to do this. There is a story of three bricklayers on a construction project. Asked what they were doing, one replied "laying bricks." Another replied "erecting a wall." The third, who also happened to be doing the best work, replied "building a cathedral." This worker's manager obviously took the time to tell him the story of what was happening.

### Why it works

Can you remember having a terrible professor when you were in college? Someone who could take the most interesting subject imaginable and turn it into a dry, barely-connected jumble of facts, figures and equations? Too much business communication today is like that – raw information unconnected by narrative vision. The problem with such communication is that it gets the same result the boring professor did; the audience disconnects.

Now think about a great professor you had in college, someone who made their subject come alive, made you care about it. Most likely stories were a big part of how he or she did that. Stories work by not only engaging our intellect but also our empathy and emotions.

To communicate with a computer, feed it raw data. But people are different. They have imagination. Story engages the imagination. There are neuro-scientific studies that show

very similar patterns of brain activity when people are imagining some activity as when they are actually doing the activity. In other words, if you can touch someone's imagination with a story it will feel to them like they are *living* it. That's powerful stuff.

### How to do it

An IBM marketing executive, Sandy Carter, used this as her email signature: "Tell me a fact and I'll learn. Tell me a truth and I'll believe. Tell me a story and it will live in my heart forever."

Everyone would love the story of their business to live in their audience's hearts forever, but it is not that simple. Good storytelling is a skill, and needs to be developed in order to be effective. Effective use of literary techniques is important. Let's take a quick look at three of the most important ones.

A good story requires at least one character – someone the audience can identify with, which is how a story generates empathy. The reason the audience can empathize with the character is because the character is involved in some sort of conflict, meaning struggle, and who in their life experience cannot empathize with struggle?

The story ends when the conflict reaches a resolution. The struggle is worked out one way or the other, and in this should be found a lesson for all involved.

In case this is starting to sound too much like your high school English class, let me give an example of how these storytelling elements can be used in marketing.

I became a freelance writer in 2006. As subsequent years passed, I was fortunate to find work with a variety of clients on a variety of

projects. Some of the projects involved marketing writing, such as helping a business write a corporate brochure. Other projects involved journalistic work and even fiction writing. The result was that I became, professionally speaking, schizophrenic. I didn't know what I was. A business writer? A journalist? A book author?

I ended up presenting myself differently to different audiences, which I didn't like. I felt that I needed to find the common denominator in my work, so that I could focus on it. After a lot of soul searching, I finally realized that all of my writing involved storytelling in one form or another, and that there was synergy contained in a wide variety of projects. Writing a novel, for instance, made me better able to tell a company's story in a brochure.

Storytelling became the flagpole I united my work life around, and instead of being a source of worry, I came to see my variety of projects as a strength.

That is my story. Notice that it contains the literary elements of character, conflict and resolution. Hopefully, after hearing it, a person can feel like they know me a little better and understand what it is I offer as a writer. That is a critical step in establishing a new business relationship.

### **Conclusion: Get Authentic, Go Epic**

To be effective, storytelling demands authenticity. But before you can be authentic with others, you have to be authentic with yourself. Think deeply about what it is that you and your firm offer the market. What sets you apart from the competition? What makes you unique?

One of my favorite sayings comes from sales guru Jeffrey Gitomer, who encourages business people not to think about end-of-month, but end-of-time. That means you should view your work-life in big picture terms. How will what you are doing today affect the story of your life and the lives of those around you?

In other words, when you tell your marketing story to the world, make it epic. A great example of this is Apple's iconic 1984 advertising campaign for the Macintosh computer. You have probably seen the commercial of the young woman throwing a hammer through a big-screen broadcast of "Big Brother." Through storytelling elements that tied into a famous novel by George Orwell, Apple was telling the market that they were not just there to sell computers. They were there to change the way people relate to technology.

Likewise, you should view your marketing messages as being about more than increasing business. You are telling the story of yourself and your firm, what you do, how you have done it in the past and how you plan to do it in the future. In the end, it will be your story, so make it a good one.

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