

# The Impact of Storytelling on Business

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“What does storytelling have to do with business?” You ask. Storytelling is becoming more and more important in our personal and professional lives. We have been living in the information age. Many people are connected electronically and yet they are detached from one another. Storytelling is a way of communicating that allows us to know each other and make an emotional and genuine connection. It is this type of connection that enables us to share information and to create change.

Business presentations are about persuading people to make a change. Whether you want your audience to become aware, interested or take an action, a good story reaches them at a much deeper emotional and sensory level than a standard PowerPoint presentation. Storytelling has an exponential impact. Andy Goodman, author of a blog called Free Range Journal, makes his living helping organizations convey their messages through storytelling. As Andy, says, “Even if you have reams of evidence on your side remember: numbers numb, jargon jars and nobody ever marched on Washington because of a pie chart. If you want to connect with your audience, tell them a story.”



Storytelling is not just for campfires, social gatherings or times at the pub. Charities have learned that using specific people and telling stories about them in both video and print are more than 20 times more effective than presenting the facts of the need.

Think of the commercials you have seen lately for charities such as Saint Jude Hospital, Save the Children, UNICEF, and many more. Then read the following article:

[http://ist-socrates.berkeley.edu/~maccoun/LP\\_PenningtonHastie1992.pdf](http://ist-socrates.berkeley.edu/~maccoun/LP_PenningtonHastie1992.pdf). The article relates the outcome of a university test of the impact on mock trial outcomes using stories. The research showed the attorneys that used stories to convey their position affected the verdicts and the credibility of the evidence.

We are not all attorneys as in the research nor are we all great speakers and storytellers like Steve Jobs, Ronald Reagan, Joel Osteen, Martin Luther King and others. But, we can learn how to incorporate stories into our presentations and become significantly more effective.

Why are the stories more effective? Our brain remembers in two ways, one in pictures and the other in stories. We tell ourselves stories about what happened in our lives and how we feel about events. It is also easier to remember a story than pages of facts or slides of text. Both history and religious books tell stories that communicate lessons and add meaning to events.

Your good story will not only entertain but also, develop understanding, teach and inspire others to take action. As we have seen in many a debate, people can be set in an opinion or view on a topic. Lots of facts may cause them to just dig in their heels and supply facts supporting the opposing view. However, a good story will reach them emotionally and begin to break down the walls that separate you from them



Whether it is a non-profit or for-profit organization that wants to gain your support for their product, idea or cause, a story can convey the facts in a way that reaches so much deeper and causes you to take another look at the situation. Nancy Duarte in her book *Resonate* says that your story must ring true with the audience and move them. It means tuning your message to the audience like the piano tuner tunes a piano to the perfect note. When your story and the audience are vibrating at the same level, they will respond.



Most business presentations want the audience to make a change or take some action. But most business presentations are dry and boring. They are frequently decks of PowerPoint slides with lots of text. If you do not capture the interest of the audience in the first 60 to 90 seconds, they tune you out. This is especially true with the GenX and GenY audience. Jason Dorsey, Millennial expert, explains these generations grew up with multi-media and expect to be entertained.

They are constantly using technology such as texting, YouTube, Pinterest, Facebook, LinkedIn, etc. Storytelling is a way of capturing their interest. The Gen X and Gen Y are not the only ones wanting a story. The more mature generations want good stories like those they remember in great books and great movies as well as those handed down by family members recounting the family history.

Organizations can craft good stories and capture the interest of their audience. To create a good story, the organization must make a commitment to being real. The audience does not want marketing speak. They want real stories that include details, truth, emotion and meaning. They know that everything was not rosy from beginning to end. They want to connect with the hero or protagonist in the story. Your job is to help them envision themselves in the same situation.



Make the audience the hero of the story. Describe the situation so they feel what you feel. The more emotion you include the deeper you connect. You want to create an experience that they will not forget.



Stories describe an incident or a barrier that prevents the hero from moving forward. This is where many case studies fall short. They factually describe the previous situation and they state that their product, service or idea solved the problem. The writer leaves out the challenges and the emotions. Because that element is missing, they fail to connect on an emotional level and do not bring the audience with them on the journey.

Think of the great movies you have seen or the books you have read and remember the struggle of the hero. There is always a challenge for the hero. He or she is conflicted. Should they remain in the current safe situation or should they take a leap of faith and take the risk.

I am currently reading Dan Brown's book, *Inferno*. It is an example of great story telling. The hero, Robert Langdon has a choice of helping an organization dedicated to improving the lives throughout the world or continuing with his safe life as a Harvard Professor. He must be convinced to take the risks and lend his expertise to the

organization. Throughout the book, he encounters more and more risks and struggles. The struggles add tension and keep the attention of the audience. They wonder, what will happen next. Unexpected situations, add more tension to the story such as that found in thrillers. Finally, the mystery is solved and the risk was worth the outcome.

Your audience is not looking for just the facts. They want to take the ride with the hero. Even the lesser characters in a story can tear at our hearts. For example, the reader can empathize with the feelings of Dante Alighieri's unrequited love for Beatrice Portinari in the *Inferno*. It is brought to life with the description of her burial site in a small church in Florence that has become a shrine for the broken-hearted. The clarity of the description enables the reader to recall the feelings associated with a broken romance or unrequited love, even if it was the first love in kindergarten.



Granted, business stories are not all as intense as *Inferno*, but real situations have personality conflicts, decisions with risks to be made. Just as movies, books and real life stories involve people with different personalities, business stories include complex people. Describing the people and their feels brings reality to the story and allows the audience to connect. Emotion is a powerful means of connecting. Watch the television dramas or commercials. Both include emotion to elicit a connection. The commercial wants to persuade you to make a purchase. They know the best advertisement is word of mouth. Consider how quickly that word travels in today's world of digital communication.



Business presentations should include some level of emotion to evoke the audience to connect. No, the business stories should not cause the listener to reach for a box of tissues, but the emotion must be strong enough to compel the audience to agree with the proposed idea, support the cause or buy the product.





You may ask, “How do I create a story when I am presenting the strategy for opening a new market for our product or why we missed our target last quarter?” Consider your message and choose to present the issues in terms of the customer/hero. Describe her and her struggles and how this is related to your message. Are you selling to a 35 year old mother of 3 who drives her children from school to a variety of after school events while managing the household tasks and a small at home business.

Paint a clear picture of her and her situation, including her challenges and her emotions. How does she feel about your product, idea, or cause? Include specific dates and other pertinent facts to add reality. Be as descriptive as possible to bring the story to life and cause it to resonate with the audience. Then tell them what you want them to do or what must be done. Make your call to action clear.

Stories including people are most effective but sometimes, it just doesn't fit. If you need to describe something such as software or infrastructure, it may be useful to use an analogy or a metaphor. But remember audiences only believe what rings true. So make sure your analogy or metaphor is true and fits the situation. Brainstorming with your team or a group of friends may help you uncover the right fit.

Business presentations like good stories include the current situation and the future situation with two possible scenarios. You can present what you predict will occur if action is not taken. Create a sense of urgency. If you do not create this sense of urgency, other projects will take priority.



It is important not to point fingers in this scenario, but rather point out the urgency and the impending outcome. Similar to the emotions elicited by a good story, the audience wants a positive outcome. They bond with the storyteller or the hero. Mentally and emotionally they begin to look for a pathway to a positive resolution to the situation. But you create more tension with emotional contrast and appeal. This element not only allows the audience to connect with you and your cause but also maintains their attention.



Add dimension by contrasting the factual information with the emotional information. As a result, the audience is eager for the resolution. Now, you present the positive possibility painting a picture with words. Describe the possibility with details so the audience can image themselves in the positive outcome. Think back to your childhood fairy tales and how they allowed to you envision yourself in one of the stories. Use a positive celebratory tone to the outcome. Then you will have carried the audience on the journey with you to the end. They will be ready to move.

It is now time to ask them to take action. Remember to make it clear and make it easy. The audience is truly the hero when they take the action requested and enable the positive outcome.

Stories are persuasive. Following this process can capture the minds and emotions of your audience significantly improve your business presentations. It takes time and practice to change the way you present but it is worth the effort.

**Contact Sales Training Solutions for more information on the power and impact of storytelling on business.**

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