

Why Stories Are The Most Powerful Sales Tool

Podcast #34 Phyllis Mikolaitis Sales Training Solutions

Hi, it's Phyllis Mikolaitis. Today, I am going to explain why so many companies are turning to a storytelling strategy to create a brand image and achieve fantastic sales results. Even the Harvard Business Review is telling us that stories are sticky and typical PowerPoint presentations are not. Stories capture your customer's attention. They help them understand the message and remember it. Stories cause people to believe or agree and to care. They also inspire your audience and motivate them to act.

Your customers are drowning in information, and they have become cynical. So, they aren't interested in more information. That's why the typical information filled PowerPoint presentations lose to a story every time. People want to have faith and trust you will do your best for them. And as you know, trust is critical to building customer relationships. Yet, trust is one of the first things to disappear when you expect a customer to make a decision based on rational sense alone.

Stories are part entertainment and part sharing knowledge or instruction. They powerfully combine facts and emotions into a familiar format that puts people at ease. So, stories build trust, connect us to the storyteller, and make us feel different emotions.

Researchers tell us that stories induce a strong neurological and physical responses. The tense moments in a story cause the brain to produce the stress hormone cortisol which causes the audience to focus. While the positive words and the visuals they create cause our body to release the trust hormone oxytocin. This hormone tells the brain that it is safe, and your customer can trust you. The happy ending causes the brain's reward center to release dopamine which causes the audience to feel hopeful and optimistic. Numbers and facts on a presentation don't do any of those things. Remember what the poet Maya Angelou said, " People will forget



what you did. But, people will not forget how you made them feel.” And that’s one of the reasons stories have such stickiness.

The Power of Stories

Neuroscience also supports the power of storytelling. To understand how it works, we must first look at how the brain causes customers to resist taking action, and then we’ll look at how and why stories unlock this resistance and motivate customers to act.

The Amygdala is an almond shaped section of the brain located near the frontal lobe. It is part of the limbic system which is responsible for our survival instincts, emotions, and memory. Because of its responsibility for survival, it stores emotional memories like fear of loss, spiders, or flying. It senses both real and potential stress. In response to potential threats, it releases neurotransmitters causing you to have doubt, fear, and anxiety.

Let me provide an example here. My customer Bob was hesitant to sign an order for 1.5 million dollars for hardware and software products that I was selling. On paper, the months of research proved the offer was more than cost-justified and it had been successfully implemented in other companies. However, Bob had an internal fear of failure. He told me that he had two sons about to apply for college, and he couldn't take a risk that might cost him his job. With no job, he wouldn't be able to pay for their college tuition. He was mentally and emotionally accessing events that managers in other companies had experienced with competitive solutions. So, his brain was blocking the decision. I told Bob a compelling story of someone he knew that had the same fear but took the leap of faith and was fantastically successful. The story created a vision and the associated emotion of success. Bob signed the order, and the implementation was a huge achievement for him. Bob got a promotion and a nice bonus.

Why the Story Worked

To find out why the story worked, let’s turn to the work of the Chip and Dan Heath, authors of the highly successful books, *Making it Stick and Switch*.

The brothers make the point that the problem and solution must connect to the audience emotionally. If your request is to donate to a charity, then the connection must be to an individual. The brothers quote Mother Theresa, who said, " If I look at the mass, I will never act. If I look at the one, I will." In the case of a product or service, you must make the connection between their problem and your solution. You must also include facts and emotional words in your story that will calm the fears and doubts of the amygdala and release the safety and trust hormone, oxytocin.

Stories contain emotion and reach the right side of the brain that processes emotion and sends calming messages to the amygdala. Moving stories connect emotionally to the audience, and they become invested in the outcome. The facts in the story reach the left side of the brain and justify the emotional decision the right side has already made.

To make it easier to understand, Chip and Dan equate the sides of the brain to a rider and an elephant. The elephant represents the emotional side of the brain, and the rider represents the rational side of the brain. Although each has its strengths and weaknesses, the 6-ton elephant typically wins over the rider. The rider's strength is in his planning ability, and his weakness is in his overanalyzing. He can get stuck going around and around in circles. He needs a clear direction to act. The elephant's strength is in his emotion. He's loyal, compassionate, sympathetic, and he gets things done. When he is motivated, he can plow through situations quickly and get it accomplished. But his weakness is his desire for instant gratification. His inability to stay on the path is much like someone on a diet cheating with ice cream, a piece of chocolate, or a slice of pizza.

As marketing and salespeople, we think the rider needs to understand the situation, and once he sees the facts, he will force the elephant to move in the right direction. However, the opposite is true, The elephant represents the protective amygdala, and he relates to the survival of the caveman. We must reach him emotionally with a compelling story.

It takes the emotion and strength of the elephant to motivate the customer. And it also requires the planning and direction of the rider to get the



customer to take the action you are seeking and direct the elephant in the right direction. A story contains both and is therefore very powerful.

Connecting the Dots

Let's talk about connecting the dots. Stories are effective, and they are told and retold because they also contain wisdom that is stored in the brain's memory bank. They also help the brain organize and store information because they provide context that is missing from presentations.

Stories illustrate relationships that people hadn't recognized before that contribute to their problem. They also spark the imagination and highlight unexpected and imaginative ways in which the audience can solve an issue. They're like flight simulators for the brain. These mental simulations help us manage emotions. They also provide a no-risk way for the customer to "test drive" your product or service. The more closely the story simulates the action we want the customer to take, the more effective it will be.

So, it's critical your story clearly communicates your message and that you connect the dots for your audience. You may see the connection between your product or service and the customer's problem, but that does not mean the customer makes that link.

The web of neurons in our brain is not connected linearly. The connections are a mix of lateral, exponential, and dynamic relationships. They exist between information on people, events, and your interpretations of them. As you grew and learned, you created a framework in your brain. You store information in units related to other units in this framework. Therefore, depending upon your audience's personal organic filing system, they may organize things in their brain differently from how you organize things in your brain. For example, I file the number for the plumber under P and the number for the exterminator under B for bugs rather than their company names. I know my system, and I'll find the number quickly when I need it. You must connect the dots to ensure they got the message.

Delivering your story

Now let's turn to delivering your story. As Walt Whitman said, "We convince others by our presence." And as Amy Cuddy relates in her book, *Presence*, the Canadian singing duo, Majid Jordan tell us "Presence is when all your senses agree on one thing at the same time." Stories help you develop presence, a feeling of power and confidence expressed in your body language, your voice, and your associated emotions. Because stories contain an emotional idea, they make people care. They bring faith, hope, perseverance, and other pleasant feelings into our daily lives. When you share your stories, you give meaning to your life and guide your audience to find meaning in their lives as well.

Your Role

So, what is your role in your story? Your role should not be that of the hero in most of your stories. To be the most powerful, you must be the guide or mentor, and the customer must be the hero.

In his book, *Influence: Science and Practice*, Robert Cialdini describes how the sequence of your information can frame perception and make influence easier and more powerful. Stories follow a structure: introduction to a character, presentation of a problem, then the main character or hero meets a guide who gives her a plan, the guide calls the hero to action and helps her avoid failure. Finally, the story ends in success. Since the story follows a structure, you can manage the sequence of information and flow. So, you can frame the perception of your audience.

Don't worry about being perfect because, people relate to real people and they forgive small mistakes. But that doesn't mean you shouldn't do your best. It means to give your all and help them navigate the waters of their personal and business problems.

When you tell a story, you give your audience the freedom to come to their own conclusion. Stories allow people to figure out what the message in the story means to them. As Peter Guber, corporate executive and entrepreneur, says in his book, *Tell to Win*, "Don't rely on state-of-the-art



technologies to connect. It's the state-of-the-heart technology that's the game-changer."

Steve Jobs knew this well. Author Carmine Gallo tells us that Jobs treated presentations as “infotainment.” He says, “ your audience wants to be educated and entertained” So have fun. Love your story and enjoy telling it. When you do, it will show in all of your senses and create a presence. It will capture the attention of your audience and it will motivate them to action. You direct the rider and motivate the elephant resulting in astonishing success.

Well, that wraps up my tips for today. I hope you enjoyed today’s podcast. My business partner John and I would be honored to be your guides on your journey to a fantastic 2020!

Check out the courses page on our website @ www.salestraining solutions.com for a FREE mini course on Presentation Skills and Storytelling. It’s is filled with tools, tips, and resources to help you achieve success.

Bye-bye until next time.