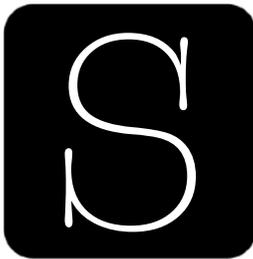




SCENE 1
THE POWER OF STORY



Storytelling isn't just for novelists and screenwriters and playwrights. If you do any kind of communicating in your day-to-day work then you are in the storytelling business.

At least you should be, if you want your audience—whether customers or colleagues—to take notice, pay attention, and absorb what you have to tell them.

Throughout time and across cultures, people have been communicating through stories—imparting beliefs, reinforcing values, giving meaning and structure to seemingly random, unconnected bits of information.

People crave stories. In fact, as my colleague Jim Signorelli points out in his upcoming book, there is scientific evidence that our brains are hardwired for stories. He cites the work of Kendall Haven, who says, “The steady diet of stories that children experience

modifies the brain to render it more predisposed to think in story terms” (*Story Proof: The Science Behind the Startling Power of Story*).

The power of storytelling is something that celebrated filmmakers and fiery orators and everyday grifters figured out a long time ago.

WHAT IS A STORY?

There are lots of different definitions of story. In his research, Jim actually counted eighty-two separate definitions. He ultimately landed on one that’s pretty similar to what we were taught in the writing classes I took at Chicago’s Second City Training Center.

In the simplest terms, a story involves a character struggling to achieve a goal in the face of difficult odds or obstacles.

I was working with a client on a project designed to highlight the company’s open, supportive culture. We interviewed employees about life in the firm and found some great stories.

One said, “My son pitches in Little League. Getting to his games means a lot to me, especially as a single parent. Here I feel comfortable taking off a little early to do that. Other places aren’t that flexible.” Our character here is a single father whose goal is to spend more time with his family. The obstacle is that most workplaces make carving out such time difficult.

Another employee described a huge, last-minute project in which one of the top partners helped her meet her deadline by staying late to help seal and stamp envelopes. The character is an overworked admin. Her goal is to meet her deadline and the obstacle is the strict hierarchical structure at most companies that impedes this kind of collaboration across levels.

Stories like these rise above the typical platitudes issued by corporate: “We promote work/life balance” or “We value teamwork.” Stories bring to life the everyday struggles and triumphs we all recognize, delivering greater impact.

CHARACTER COUNTS

At the heart of every good story is a character we can relate to. And the best characters are multi-dimensional. They're recognizably human.

Take Tony Soprano. He's a man in a violent business, but he also shows deep love for his family, has a charming affection for animals, and suffers from debilitating panic attacks. We love Tony Soprano because he's complex and richly drawn and we can identify with him (not the violence and killing so much, but the daily anxieties and struggles with relationships and work).

Contrast that with, say, any villain in your typical James Cameron epic. The snooty rich guy in *Titanic*, for instance, or the ruthless military commander in *Avatar*.

What do we see? A caricature, not a character. Relentlessly evil with few, if any, redeeming or mitigating qualities. These people apparently are nasty just for the sake of it, which is not terribly interesting because it's not very believable.

OH, THE HUMANITY!

People who lead an organization or a team or face an audience need to be humanized. We can do that by showing a surprising side of their character that others don't often see. Or by highlighting qualities people can relate to—love of family, pets, hobbies, or sports, for instance.

I interviewed a factory worker in a plant that makes candy and gum. I asked her how she ensures a quality product. She walked me through all the steps, from inspecting for impurities to proper packaging to machine maintenance.

Then I asked about her children. "They must think you have a pretty cool job," I said. She lit up.

"Oh yeah," she replied, turning over a package of gum and pointing to a series of numbers and letters on the label. "See this code? It tells you exactly where this gum was made, right down to the production line. My kids will go into the candy aisle of a store, check out the label

and say, “This is Mommy’s gum!””

This woman is working hard to produce a quality product, because her customers are not only like family, they *are* family. It’s good enough for yours because she makes sure it’s good enough for hers.

Now *that’s* a story.

STORIES ARE EVERYWHERE: WE JUST NEED TO FIND THEM

When you’re presenting yourself to an audience—whether it’s on paper, on camera or live—you need to go mining for your inner stories. Here are some questions to help you uncover them and discover what you’re really passionate about.

■ Work-related:

- What do you love about your job?
- What’s your favorite moment of the day?
- What makes you proud?
- What makes you jump out of bed in the morning to come to work?
- Where does your job fit in the big picture?
- How does it help achieve the organization’s goals?
- Describe a challenge you’ve faced.
 - How did you overcome it?
 - What were the keys to success?
 - How did resolving it make you feel?

■ Personal:

- What are your hobbies or interests?
- What does your family mean to you?
- What do your kids think you do?
- What did you want to be when you were growing up?
- What did you study in school?
- Who are your heroes and why?

This approach also works when you're putting the spotlight on someone else—a customer or employee, for instance. Posing these types of questions helps open people up and draws out their stories.

THEN WE HAVE TO SHAPE THEM

In the book *Story*, which is widely considered the bible of screenwriting, author Robert McKee talks about causality versus coincidence. Causality involves events that are related and interconnected, thus providing meaning. Coincidence describes random events that have little impact on or relation to each other.

Causality makes for a better, more satisfying story. If your “character” is a firebrand CEO who shakes things up wherever he goes, then a story about him getting kicked out of prep school for defying authorities is an illuminating tale. His decision to study Spanish in college because he felt it was the easiest language to learn is less compelling—it doesn't reinforce the point you're making about what a rebel he is.

AND NARROW THEM

Another big part of shaping a story involves separating the meaningful wheat from the merely distracting chaff. We've all been subjected from time to time to the agony of a story chock full of unnecessary tangents and useless detail.

Like the meaningless date. Not to mention the even more meaningless one-sided debate about the date: *was it March or April? I think it was April. No, wait, it was snowing, so it must have been March...*

And the elevation of bit players to leading roles, complete with formal introductions and needless biographical data.

We're not making a documentary here. In fact, even documentary makers don't document every detail. They tell stories. And they know that facts—especially the unnecessary ones—can be the enemy of a good story.

FINALLY, WE HAVE TO TELL THEM

How best to tell the story?

Just as there are a million stories in the big city, there are a million ways to tell them. Some are covered in this book—understanding audiences, tapping into emotion, using precise and evocative language. (And, as we'll discuss later on, one of the best ways to tell a story is to show it.)

Some of my favorite modern storytellers are Malcolm Gladwell, author of *The Tipping Point* and *Blink*, and the geniuses behind *Freakonomics*, Stephen Dubner and Steven Levitt. These bestselling authors manage to craft riveting tales out of obscure topics like the factors that motivate sumo wrestlers to cheat or how Hush Puppies suddenly became a major nationwide fad.

They've mastered an approach journalists use to draw readers in. They start small, on a very personal, human scale, focusing on a lone individual or a simple detail. Then they blow it out into a full-fledged story that illuminates a larger truth or trend.

They understand that anecdotes and examples help bring facts and statistics to life.

THAT'S ENTERTAINMENT

A major insurance company sought to encourage teens to drive safely. Instead of doing a standard PSA campaign, they created a seven-part web series—a whole mini-drama with characters and stories and action.

Messages about the hazards of texting and driving or drinking and driving were incidental to the story. The company knew that to reach their audience, they had to entertain them.

Whatever you write, whether it's a case study or the "About Us" section of a website or a blog post, seek first to entertain. Informing and persuading are important, of course, but if you put the reader to sleep, you'll never get that chance.

THE POWER OF STORY

Because they reveal something about ourselves that others can relate to, stories have unrivaled power for breaking down barriers between people and groups. From there, the doors are open—to connect, to communicate, to persuade.

Everyone's got a story. Every person, every organization. And just about everything we write—case studies, speeches, web copy, bios, marketing materials—can be improved by framing it in terms of story, or at least including story elements.

AN ACTOR AT WORK

Breathe Life into Your Case Studies

Case studies do not have to be boring. (Contrary to practically every one you've ever read.) Most case studies are unnecessarily dense in detail, self-centered where they should be reader-oriented, too general where they should be personal.

Imagine a case study that starts like this:

Richard Gilmore didn't need to check the computer readout to see that something on the production line was off. Nicknamed "Hawkeye" by his co-workers for his constant vigilance, the seventeen-year veteran could tell just by sight that the components were out of balance. After extensive study, the problem that Richard and his co-workers first spotted turned out to be a systemic failure in machine maintenance...



Contrast that with the typical, “XYZ Company was experiencing quality control issues with one of its major engine systems. We conducted a study and found blah, blah, and blah. And furthermore, blah.” Wouldn’t you rather hear about Richard and find out how his story ends?

Of course you would. Because it’s personal. And because it taps into the universal appeal of characters battling obstacles to achieve their goals. In short, it’s a story.

Tell Your Story

Everyone needs to craft his or her own personal story. One that communicates who you are, as opposed to the things you do.

I was in a meeting recently where the participants went around the table introducing themselves. Most simply offered up a chronological listing of their employment history and various professional accomplishments, which they could have communicated less painfully by circulating their CVs.

How much more meaningful and memorable would it have been to say something like, “I went to school to become a teacher but thought it was impractical and pursued law instead. Now after twenty years in legal practice, here I am teaching.” *Irony!*

Or: “I started out just answering phones. When things needed doing, I did them. I got interested in accounting, got a degree at the local community college, and now I’m finance manager.” *Rags to riches!*

Or: “I was a high flyer on Wall Street, then I was indicted, imprisoned, and paroled. Now I’m a greeter at Walmart.” *Fall from grace!*

Once you start thinking in story terms—about

characters and their struggles and about connecting cause and effect—you'll be better able to shape and communicate your own story.

Deliver a Winning Sales Pitch

For maximum credibility, let *others* tell your story. Customer testimonials, third-party endorsements, media coverage, industry rankings, and awards are always going to be more convincing and more meaningful than anything you say about yourself.

It's the reason we look to Zagat's or Yelp for restaurant recommendations or TripAdvisor for hotel reviews.

So step aside and let others do the selling.