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UNLEASH THE POWER OF STORYTELLING
A Practical Guide to Crafting and Telling Stories That WIN HEARTS, CHANGE MINDS, and GET RESULTS

By Rob Biesenbach

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Chapter 1: What Makes Stories So Powerful

Study after study confirms what we all know intuitively: that stories are uniquely powerful.

We witness that power when we dry our tears as the house lights come up. When the book we put down sticks with us for days, months, and years. And when we hold our loved ones a little closer after watching a tragic tale play out on the news.

If you want to break down walls with people, truly connect with them, and make an impact, few things beat a well-crafted, well-told story.

There is both a nature and a nurture argument behind why stories are so effective. Let’s start with nurture.

We Are Raised On Stories

Bedtime stories, fables, fairy tales, cartoons — we are immersed in stories from nearly the moment we’re born. And we are inundated with them throughout our lives.

Worldwide we spend $90 billion a year on movies and another $90 billion on video games. And we watch up to 35 hours a week of television (at least in the United States, which appears to lead the world in this dubious distinction).

So stories are embedded in our consciousness. When someone says they’re going to tell us a story, it triggers certain expectations in our mind. We assume it will follow a familiar pattern — setup, climax, resolution. When it doesn’t, we are left dissatisfied.

As Kendall Haven argues in his book Story Proof, “The steady diet of stories that children experience modifies the brain to render it more predisposed to think in story terms.”

And that’s where things get really interesting.

Our Brains Are Hardwired for Stories

Study after study shows that stories have a unique effect on our brains. Research by “neuroeconomist” Paul Zak found that stories cause the brain to produce oxytocin, a chemical related to feelings of empathy and a desire to cooperate. They essentially soften up our audience, making them more amenable to our ideas.

Stories stimulate our senses in multiple ways, to the extent that listening goes from a passive exercise to an active experience. In fact, multiple studies have shown that when we hear a story, it triggers the same area of the brain that’s stimulated when we experience an event.

Think about that for a minute: as far as the brain is concerned, there’s little distinction between story and experience.

And this is what storytelling does: far from a passive experience, stories sweep us up and involve us in multiple important ways — physiologically, emotionally, intellectually:

- As storytelling expert Nancy Duarte describes in her popular TED Talk, great stories cause our palms to sweat, our hearts to race, our eyes to dilate;
- Emotionally, we empathize with the protagonist, we identify with her struggle; and
Mentally, we put ourselves inside that story, asking the essential questions, “What would I do in these circumstances? How would I measure up?”

**Stories Trump Statistics**

In the influential book *Made to Stick*, one of the authors did a memory exercise with his university students in which they listened to a series of presentations and were tested on what they retained. He found that while 63 percent remembered the stories they heard, just 5 percent could recall the statistics presented.

Stories stick. Here’s one that stuck with me.

I was working with a company that makes candy and gum, and they wanted to demonstrate their commitment to quality. So we put together a video crew and went looking for stories.

That’s when I met Estela, a factory worker whose job was to inspect packages of gum before they left the plant. I asked her what she does to ensure quality in her work.

Because I asked her a process question, I got a process answer. She walked me through her routines from the start of the line to the finish. She showed me the x-ray machine that checks for bits of metal, and she pointed to a laminated sheet with a matrix of various quality criteria that she judges each pack of gum on.

For many companies, this would be their story:

> Our people are passionately committed to quality. They’re on the line every day, utilizing state-of-the-art technology to test for impurities and applying our strict 24-point quality checklist, all to ensure that the gum you’re enjoying right now is as fresh and tasty as the day it left our door!

That’s not a story; it’s just a bunch of facts, claims, and data. And those don’t stick.

**Get to the Heart of It**

So instead I went to the figurative heart of the matter. I knew Estela had children, so I asked her what they think about what she does. That’s when she lit up. “They call me the Candy Lady,” she beamed.

Then she turned over one of the packages of gum and showed me a code on the bottom. That code tells you exactly when and where the gum was made, right down to the individual shift and production line.

And here’s the kicker: her children can read the code. So what do you think happens when her family goes to the store? The kids run straight to the candy aisle, turn over the packages of gum, and when they find the right code, they yell out, “This is mommy’s gum! My mommy made this gum.”

Now that’s a story. Here’s a company you can count on for quality. It’s good enough for your family because Estela is down there on the line every day making sure it’s good enough for hers.

**Six Keys to Powerful Stories**

Estela’s story perfectly illustrates six key ingredients that give stories their power.
1. **Stories tap into emotion**

The best stories trigger an emotional response, which is key to provoking empathy in our audience and unlocking decision-making. And research published in the *Journal of Neuroscience* suggests that an “emotionally charged event” carries far more weight and persistence in our memory than ordinary, neutral events. (For more on the role of emotion, see Chapter 4.)

2. **Stories put a face on an issue**

In the end, nobody cares about processes or programs; they care about people. So if you can embody your idea, your initiative, your brand in a great character that people can relate to, you’re going to have more success.

3. **Stories connect us**

Most people have never stepped foot in a candy factory, but they can still identify with Estela’s story. Why? Because it’s not about candy manufacturing, it’s about a mom looking out for the health and well-being of her children — something most of us can relate to.

4. **Stories humanize us**

The stories we tell, whether about ourselves or others, offer a glimpse into who we are and what we value. And that’s highly appealing. It’s especially important for leaders — people want to follow humans, not machines.

5. **They raise the stakes**

The Estela story is not about manufacturing standards or error rates. It’s about health and safety and love and family. Stories raise us up out of the everyday and the mundane, appealing instead to universal values that bring us all together.

6. **Stories are about “show, don’t tell”**

As one of my Second City instructors put it, “Actors express themselves through actions. That’s why they’re called actors, not talkers.” It’s better to demonstrate who you are and what you stand for than to just tell us about it. And that’s one of the things stories do best.

**Defeating Match.com Syndrome**

The principle of “show, don’t tell” is the antidote to something I call “match.com syndrome.” If you spend time on any dating site you’ll find that everyone describes themselves the same way. They say they’re “funny, intelligent and adventurous.” (Would that that were true!)

These kinds of generic claims are ineffective because everyone makes them — and tend not to be objective judges of our own stellar qualities.
So instead of saying you’re funny, be funny. Instead of saying you’re intelligent, talk about the last book you read. Instead of saying you’re adventurous, show me a picture of that white-water rafting trip you took.

All of those things together are going to paint a much more compelling and credible picture of who you are than any of the common labels we apply to ourselves.

Which we do all the time, as individuals and as organizations. “I’m resourceful.” “We offer personal attention.” “We provide the highest quality.”

Stories give proof to these claims and they set us apart. Because anyone can talk about service excellence, but nobody else has your particular story about the overjoyed customer and the employee who bent over backwards to personally resolve her issue.

A Lesson From the Godfather

This discussion leads us to “The Godfather” films, which any fan will tell you offer lessons for practically every circumstance in life.

In the opening scene of the first film we instantly recognize that Don Vito Corleone is a man to be reckoned with. Dressed in a tuxedo, he sits stoically in a darkened room behind a big desk, patiently listening to a nervous man pleading for his help.

It’s all right there in the story: show, don’t tell.

Now what if the movie opened with the Don saying, "Welcome to my office. I’m the most powerful leader of the five families. How can I use my vast criminal empire to crush your enemies today?"

That wouldn’t be particularly effective (or entertaining).

Always challenge yourself to dispense with the hollow claims and tell stories instead:

- In a job interview, don’t just say you’re dependable, tell us how you worked all night to meet an impossible deadline.
- On your website, don’t just say your people provide “hands-on” attention, tell us about the senior VP rolling up his sleeves and working away with the rest of the team.
- During your sales pitch, don’t just talk about quality, tell us about the customer who gave you that five-star review.

Whether you’re networking, selling, interviewing or just representing yourself in the marketplace, offer people something they can’t refuse: a specific story that that’s more powerful than mere words alone.
Chapter 11: How to Tell Your Own Story

Sometimes the hardest story to tell is the one we tell about ourselves. Modesty (false or otherwise), lack of objectivity, and insecurity all come into play.

After all, it’s one thing to tell a story that bombs — the embarrassment is fleeting. But it’s a whole other issue when that story is about you. Suddenly you’re left wondering, “Did the story suck, or do I suck?”

But the ability to tell your own story is critical to successfully navigating job interviews, networking events, and first-time meetings with others.

So here’s how to prepare for the next time someone says, “So tell me about yourself.”

What Not to Do: Alphabet Soup Syndrome

A few years ago I attended a meeting where the first order of business was to go around the table and take turns introducing ourselves.

It was awful. It was like an alphabet soup of job titles, company and department names, dates, dollars, and numbers:

“I was a Field Sales Rep for three-and-a-half years, then in 2011 I was promoted to Sales Manager, then in October 2014 I became Director of Sales for the Western Region, where I managed a field force of 374 reps. We won Best Region in 2016, achieving total sales of $219 million, then …”

They might as well have been reading their LinkedIn profiles aloud. It was all fact with no heart. Data with no context or meaning. In short, there was no narrative. Nothing that would stick or particularly distinguish one person from another.

Worst of all, it was boring. Imagine hearing basically the same thing, just with different data points, from 20 different people.

Turn Your Life Into a Story

That’s when I realized there has to be a better way. What if we could capture the events of our careers and our lives in a form that is unique and compelling, full of conflict and drama and human interest and all the other things that make stories so effective?

Framing your career in story terms makes it more entertaining, of course, which makes people more likely to listen to and remember you. But it’s also a way of communicating not just what you do, but why you do it. It answers questions like:

- What sets you apart?
- What drives you?
- What do you stand for?
- What value do you offer?
- How are you making a difference?

I’ve worked with a lot of insurance salespeople and, believe it or not, they’re among the best storytellers I’ve come across. Which makes sense, since selling is about appealing to
emotion, and insurance involves some pretty high-stakes drama — literally, issues of life and death.

Some of the stories I heard went like this:

_I went into this business because I was told the money was good, and that’s true. By the time I was 25 I was the first among my friends to own a home. But one night I got a phone call. A good friend was in a car accident and died. It was horrible, but what made it even worse was finding out that he had no plan in place to provide for his family. His wife and two young children were left with little in savings, a lot of debt and a future of uncertainty._

_For whatever reason, I had never talked to him about planning for his family’s future. We were buddies, and I guess I didn’t want to be one of those pushy salesmen that everybody avoids at parties. But since then I’ve made it my mission to help as many people as possible avoid my friend’s fate. So, yes, the payday is nice, but for me nothing beats being able to look a customer in the eye at a time of crisis and say, “Don’t worry, you’re covered.”_

Now most of us don’t deal with true life-and-death matters like this in our everyday work. But I believe everyone has a story to tell. It may not be as dramatic as this one, but it’s there, just waiting to be discovered and shared.

**Discover the Implicit Narrative of Your Career**

Marketing strategist Dorie Clark talks about finding the “implicit narrative” of your life — the common thread that ties your experiences together.

Whether we’re aware of it or not, something is driving us forward, from job to job, experience to experience. It could be a set of values, a character trait, a skill. Events may feel random in the moment, but there’s often a pattern that reveals itself over time.

In a _commencement address_ to Stanford University, Steve Jobs likened this emerging pattern to connecting the dots:

_“You can’t connect the dots looking forward; you can only connect them looking backwards. So you have to trust that the dots will somehow connect in your future. You have to trust in something — your gut, destiny, life, karma, whatever.”_

Creating your narrative is about connecting those dots.

**Start By Examining Your Career Highlights**

As a starting point, Clark recommends writing down your "war stories" — the major successes and challenges of your career and your life. Don’t think too hard about it. What are the first things that come to mind — promotions, awards, rejections, failures?

Now looks at those stories and ask yourself some questions:

- Do any themes or patterns emerge?
- What skills did you bring to bear on the problems you faced?
- What traits helped you succeed?
- What did others have to say about your role?
What did you most enjoy about that work?
How did it make you feel?

In creating my own story, I discovered that the thing that has driven me, satisfies me, and has been central to my success, is the desire to perform. It was there at nearly every phase of my life:

- I was the baby of the family and the natural center of attention.
- In school I was what's known as a "show-off" (aka, a pest).
- At the office I was often drafted to create Top-10 lists, sketches, and song parodies for major occasions.
- As a speechwriter, I was likely drawn to the rhetorical flourishes, the emotional highs and lows, the words designed to provoke an audience reaction.
- And that all led to performing on stage, first as an actor and then as a public speaker.

Yet if you had told me years ago that I'd be standing up in front of audiences for a living, I would have thought you were insane. As Jobs said, it was impossible to predict then, but looking back, the dots were all there, just waiting to be connected.

Structure Your Story

To create a personal narrative, I recommend a five-part structure:

1. The beginning: the “normal state” of things.
2. Inciting incident: something that disrupts the normal state.
3. Turning point: the path you took in response.
4. Conflict: challenges along the way.
5. The end/resolution: brings it all full circle.

To revisit our original “character, goal, challenge, resolution” formula, all those elements are implicit here. You, obviously, are the character, the inciting incident is the challenge, the turning point is the goal and the end is the resolution. This is just another approach that I believe works better for the personal story.

Let’s apply this structure to the insurance salesman’s story above:

1. In the beginning, our character is focused on a career based on financial reward.
2. The inciting incident is his friend’s death.
3. That leads to the turning point: his mission to help others avoid the same mistake.
4. The conflict is his aversion to coming across as the typical insurance salesman, especially to his friends.
5. In the end, he resolves that challenge by thinking of the bigger picture: the ability to offer comfort and reassurance to a customer in a time of need.

Think of these as guidelines, and don’t worry if your particular inciting incident isn’t as dramatic or your turning point isn’t as sharp. Just do the best with the experiences life has dealt you.

My Story

In fact, my own story is a little softer around the edges:
For most of my life I pursued a conventional career in business, doing corporate communications and PR. (Beginning/normal state.) While it was satisfying and rewarding, I always felt there was something more creative calling to me. (Inciting incident.) So I scratched a long-time itch and started taking classes at Second City. (Turning point.) That grew into a second career performing on stage and in front of the camera.

For years I kept my two worlds separate. (Conflict.) I’d do my client work by day and steal away to audition and rehearse and perform at night. But the more I studied and performed the more I realized these two worlds were not so different. They both require you to connect with audiences, to express yourself in a compelling way, and to tell stories. So I found a way to bring these two worlds together in my books and workshops. Now I’m doing the thing I love—performing on stage — while sharing the business knowledge I’ve accumulated. And I’m helping people become more skilled, confident communicators, which is very rewarding. (Resolution.)

If this were a Hollywood movie the inciting incident would have been getting fired from my job for daydreaming about a show business career. And the turning point would have gone like this:

I left the office and wandered the city alone, head down in the pouring rain. I spotted a reflection in a puddle and looked up — it was the warm glow of the Second City marquee. Like a beacon, it drew me inside, where I discovered the welcoming embrace of a group of like-minded creatives. I was home!

But that’s not how it went. There were multiple possible inciting incidents and turning points over a period of years, one of them personal — the end of a relationship. But most of them felt like distractions that would take too long to cover.

Again, storytelling is about making choices — and those choices are driven by our goals, the audience, and our own comfort level with revealing the details of our lives.

Remember Your Audience

Which brings up another important point: as with any other communication, your personal story needs to finely tuned to your audience’s interests and needs. If you’re in a job interview, what set of qualities is the hiring manager looking for? If you’re selling, what is the buyer interested in?

So you may have slightly different versions of your story — or even completely different stories — for different occasions. The story I tell potential business clients is very different from one I might tell a casting director.

Keep Working At It

Developing your personal narrative may not come naturally at first. If you’re having trouble, try getting input from people who know you well.

Depending on the circumstance, it may useful to bring in elements from your personal life — a cross-country trip that opened your eyes, an illness that gave you perspective, a friend who left a mark on you. If you’re at the early point of your career, this may be necessary, in fact.
To sharpen your narrative, go back to the tips in Chapter 2 on story structure and Chapter 5 on focusing your story. Don’t neglect the emotional component discussed in Chapter 4. That’s what will make you more relatable.

Remember: the point is not to capture every twist and turn of your life or career. The goal is to give people a glimpse of who you are and pique their interest enough that they’ll want to know more.
LIKE WHAT YOU SEE? WANT MORE?

I hope you enjoyed these two preview chapters of my upcoming book.

As a subscriber to my mailing list you will be among the first to know when the finished book is available, and you’ll even have a chance to review a FREE advance copy of the whole thing when it’s done.

You’ll also receive my monthly email, which is full of tips on storytelling, presentation and other communication skills — both from me and from experts I rely on.

You are free to unsubscribe from the email at any time, of course, but don’t worry: I will NOT be flooding your inbox with promotions and offers. I hate those, too. Except in rare circumstances, you will be hearing from me no more than once a month.

To give you an idea of what else the book covers, check out the table of contents on the next page.

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That means:

- Cutting through the clutter to engage meaningfully with customers, employees, and other key audiences.
- Becoming a more powerful, persuasive presenter and communicator.
- Discovering and articulating the story that will set you apart from others.

If you’re looking for a practical roadmap to communication success, find out more about my inspiring keynotes, substantive training, one-on-one consulting and fun, popular books:

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