



## Told Any Good Stories Lately?

By: F. Scott Addis, CPCU, CRA, CBWA

*Titanic. The Great Escape. Schindler's List. Ray. The Pursuit of Happyness.*

What do these blockbuster movies have in common? They are all based on a true story.

In a world filled with sound bites, ads, 140-character tweets, we seem to forget the power of storytelling. Yet, when we tap into storytelling, we become irresistible!

What is storytelling? And why does it have such impact? A statement by the National Storytelling Network ([www.storynet.org](http://www.storynet.org)), an organization whose mission is to advocate for the preservation and growth of the art of storytelling, defines storytelling as an ancient art form and valuable form of human expression.

At its core, storytelling is the art of using language, vocalization and/or physical movement and gesture to reveal the elements and images to a specific, live audience. A story is best defined as a narrative account of a real or imagined event. The word telling involves direct contact between teller and listener. The teller's role is to prepare and present the necessary language, vocalization and physicality to effectively and efficiently communicate the images of the story. The listener's role, on the other hand, is to actively create vivid, multi-sensory images, actions, characters and events – the reality -- of the story in his or her mind based on the performance of

the teller and other past experiences, beliefs and understandings. The completed story happens in the mind of the listener, unique and personal for each individual. (Sametz, Fall 2003)

Storytelling is one of the most powerful skills you can possess. A story well told can make you smile, laugh, cry, swell up with pride, or rise with indignation.

### The History and Research on Storytelling

Storytelling has a rich history, dating back to the Stone Age where stories were told around the fires, and the cave walls were illustrated to depict the stories. Storytelling became an art form to the ancient Greeks, and epic stories were passed from one generation to another.

But we don't have to go that far back to see the power of storytelling. Think back to your childhood when you begged your parents to read just "one more" favorite story – the one you knew by heart. Why did you want to hear it again and again? Perhaps because it captivated your interest by giving you a dramatic presentation of a situation, showed you how the characters solved a problem, and instilled positive and negative consequences of those choices. Storytelling has held the short attention spans of children for centuries. Teachers have found that storytelling improves students' creativity and listening skills.

Storytelling evokes a strong neurological response. According to Paul Zak, director of the Center for Neuroeconomics Studies at Claremont University, our brains produce more stress-induced cortisol during tense moments. When we see something cute or hear a happy ending to a story, our brain releases dopamine – which makes us feel more euphoric, hopeful, and optimistic.

Johns Hopkins researchers, Keith Quesenberry and Michael Coolson, discovered "people are attracted to stories because we're social creatures and we relate to other people."

Researchers have also uncovered that the human mind turns experiences into a story in an attempt to remember things. Called a mnemonic device, humans almost always translate information into a form that the brain can retain – better than its original form. Researchers have found that mnemonics work best if they evoke a visual image. When people need to learn a complex subject, they can most rapidly acquire knowledge by making up and vividly picturing a story about the topic.

### **Does Your Story Matter?**

Stories create buzz. The more buzz about your product or service, obviously the more awareness there is about your brand. And the more awareness, the higher the probability of being in that top-of-mind position.

If your story matters, it will be shared, retold and passed on. By doing what matters and telling a story that matters, you will ignite a passion amongst people that is inherently shareable and provide a gigantic boost to your firm's growth and long-term viability. So, the million-dollar

question is, have you crafted your story in a manner whereby others are likely to share? Let's take a look at three examples<sup>1</sup>:

1. Jared ate over 700 Subway sandwiches over the course of a year and lost 245 pounds. This simple story drove Subway sales and franchise expansion through the roof because it illustrated that Subway must be delicious enough to go there every day for a year plus help you lose weight.
2. Blake Mycoskie, the CEO of Tom's Shoes and author of *Start Something that Matters*, gave one pair of shoes to disadvantaged children for each pair sold. In South America, he gave away 10,000 pair of shoes. And, to date, has given away more than 1 million pair in 40 countries. Why buy his shoes? Because in addition to comfort and style, you are helping to put shoes on children in need throughout the world.
3. In 1970, Nike designated their executives "corporate storytellers" as part of its corporate culture. The stories the company's leaders told ranged from recounting the company history to tales of people simply getting things accomplished. Imagine hearing the story of how Nike founder, Bill Bowerman went to his workshop one day after a brainstorm session and poured shoe rubber into the family waffle iron. That was the birth of the famous Nike waffle sole.

Whether it's sharing your value proposition, selling sandwiches or shoes, storytelling is a powerful tool that can mean the difference between extraordinary status and just being another brand.

### **Stories Inspire Action**

Storytelling has become a lost art in the business world. According to Riley Gibson in *Three Reasons to Master the Art of Storytelling* (Inc. 2014), 'Instead of taking the time to craft captivating stories, most business professionals create dreary PowerPoint presentations filled with facts, jargon, buzzwords and graphs. PowerPoint is killing your ability to tell a good story.'

If you are intrigued by the lost art of storytelling, consider the following:

**Stories are Memorable.** When you are able to present facts and information framed by a compelling story, you will not only hold the attention of your audience, you will make this information more memorable. Just ask Julie Roehm, whose title is "Chief Storyteller" of B2B software company, SAP. She states, "Write a story you could tell to anyone, anywhere. Make it so simple that anyone from a child in kindergarten to the Chairman of the Board can understand."

**Stories connect us.** When your stories are memorable, they will travel further because they are easy for listeners to recount in the future. Stories build deeper connections, make you more

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<sup>1</sup> Carmody, Bill. "How to Grow by Becoming an Expert Storyteller." Inc. 21 Oct. 2014. Web.

trustworthy and humanize you. When your story is told, a human face is put on a complex problem.

**Stories make your message unique.** Your story makes your value proposition...your unique message come alive. It sets you apart in the marketplace. According to Forrester Research, only 23% of consumers trust television ads, only 20% trust ads in magazines or on the radio. And, only 16% trust information on an organization's website. When we think we are being sold to, we stop listening, back up, arms folded. Yet when we are told a story, we listen. We want to hear what happens next.

**Stories produce experiences.** Stories create a lasting impression because they go deeper than facts and figures. When you create a story, your customers gain an impression of your products, services, and resources that sits deep in their hearts – unlike numbers that barely linger in the periphery of their busy minds.

**Stories inspire action.** Research substantiates that stories move customer's hearts and minds in the direction of the storyteller. Think about 'Hallmark moments' that tug on heartstrings. Or the Thai Life Insurance video "Unsung Hero" that went viral and has more than 22 million viewers on YouTube.

### A 5-Step Process<sup>2</sup>

Julie Roehm suggests you break down storytelling into the following 5-step process:

**Step 1. Who are you talking about?** Describe the customer and give them something real.

**Step 2. Define the problem or opportunity in simple terms.** Discover what keeps your customer awake at night and clearly and concisely provide a solution.

**Step 3. What is it that (your company) can do to help solve that problem?** Again, in simple terms without buzzwords or jargon, give the customer a sense of what you can do to help them.

**Step 4. What does solving this problem do?** Or what does your customer think solving this problem will do for them? What can your customer do now (that the problem is solved) that they couldn't do before? How does your involvement impact their business, industry, and life?

**Step 5. What's the customer's customer story?** Show how your customer's customer will be impacted (i.e., how their life will change or experience improve) because you delivered something better.

Told any good stories lately?

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<sup>2</sup> Carmody, Bill. "How to Grow by Becoming an Expert Storyteller." Inc. 21 Oct. 2014. Web.

### About the Author

Scott Addis, CPCU, CRA, CBWA is the CEO of Beyond Insurance and is recognized as an industry leader having been named a Philadelphia finalist for *Inc. Magazine's* "Entrepreneur of the Year" award as well as one of the "25 Most Innovative Agents in America." Beyond Insurance is a consulting firm that offers leadership training, cultural transformation, and talent and tactical development for enlightened professionals who are looking to take their practice to the next level. Since 2007, the proven and repeatable processes of Beyond Insurance have transformed individuals and organizations as measured by enhanced organic growth, productivity, profitability, and value in the marketplace.