THERE ARE FIVE SIDES TO STORY:

WHICH ARE YOU MISSING?

By Lori L. Silverman

Business communicators inherently understand the importance of telling a story, whether it be for branding, public relations, or internal employee communications. So do many business leaders, who often use them in presentations to staff, customers, even investors.

But is there more to story than the act of telling it? Karen Dietz of the National Storytelling Network defines story as "an act of communication that provides people with packets of sensory material that allow the listener to quickly an easily internalize the material, understand it, and create meaning from it." This approach broadens the definition of what a story is, to encompass the overall meaning your organization has to its employees and customers.

In-depth interviews conducted with more than 170 business leaders in 80-plus organizations throughout the world suggest that stories have strategic importance far beyond mere entertainment value. In the aggregate, the responses from these executives revealed five practices surrounding the use of stories that bring results: how to find stories, how to dig into them to uncover hidden patterns and themes, how to select those stories that need to be reinforced, how to craft memorable stories, and how to embody stories to positively affect attitudes, thoughts and behaviors.

FINDING STORIES

There's an implicit assumption behind finding stories: that stories already exist in abundance within organizations. So, how can you bring them to the surface, and why would you want to do so?

For a story to exist, there needs to be a listener who behaves in an appreciative, rather than an active, manner. Appreciative listening implies giving your undivided attention and demon-strating sincere interest. It also means immersing yourself in the story without interrupting to ask questions, and forego-ing judgment of the person and the story's content. Ultimately, the listener wants to hear the details about a situation rather than interesting sound bites or a sanitized report.

You can evoke stories by using prompts that begin with the words "tell me about...." This approach can be used in talking with an employee about an issue or problem, for coaching someone or relaying performance feedback, in new employee orientation, and so on. Narrative generated this way is typically richer in detail and more contextually based than that gathered through such fact-based questions as "How did you handle that situation?" and "What hap-pened next?" Gayle Shaw-Hones, associ-ated director of learning and perform-ance for Global Medical Affairs at Wyeth Pharmaceuticals in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, found she had to add the word "story" to prompts when speaking with highly technical staff. Only with openers such as "tell me a story about...." was she able to move them beyond bul-leted responses.

By evoking employees' personal stories, the advertising agency Saatchi & Saatchi reinforces and links staff to its core pur-pose. Every quarter, 20 employees from around the world come together for a full-day session where prompts are used to bring forth inspirational stories–either about how they were inspired by a col-league or work event or about when they inspired somebody at work. Saatchi & Saatchi connects this idea of individual inspiration to the idea of inspiration as one of the organization's key values.

By finding stories in these ways, you'll forge deeper, more meaningful connec-tions with employees, customers and shareholders, and gain information to help make better decisions. If you're trusted in the organization, you'll be able to take the pulse of the corporate culture and quickly learn which stories are being brought to the surface or kept from view. More important, you'll discover which stories aren't being told at all.

DIGGING INTO STORIES

Every story provides both surface con-tent and deeper meaning. How can this help you? Imagine collecting stories, rather than specific answers, from focus group participants in response to brand-ing questions, and identifying meaning-ful hidden themes within and across them. Imagine audiotaping employee stories about a process and realizing afterward that they've each provided the knowledge necessary to do the work that has never been described before. Imagine reviewing videotaped stories from organizational leaders and realizing that they collectively pinpoint ways to address longstanding problems.

Hidden below the surface narrative of stories are the assumptions, models, expectations, and beliefs that guide peo-ple's decisions and behaviors. These ele-ments don't reveal themselves on sur-veys, and rarely do they come out in response to specific questions. Yet stories

about real or imagined situations (such as those that flesh out the vision for a project or the organization) and those that interpret the meaning behind tangible objects or images tend to capture these underlying assumptions.

Consider digging into specific stories or across groups of them to ascertain employee and customer satisfaction levels and unmet needs. You might bring up unknown issues, concerns or problems, as well as tacit knowledge. You may also identify a dominant story narrative, which can help you understand why organizational changes are not working, for example, or how a brand is being perceived in the marketplace.

SELECTING THE STORIES

In workshops, I frequently ask business leaders to list the criteria they use to determine what stories to reinforce inside and outside their organizations. Their responses include:

- They support our vision, mission, strategy and goals.

- They define and demonstrate our core values.

- They communicate our successes—and our failures.

- They connect us to our history and our legacy.

- They highlight both good and bad customer feedback.

Overall, what they're identifying are stories that characterize the essence of the organization, what it's trying to accomplish, and what it values. They're also aware that stores that lurk in the shadows—those that draw attention to problems and failures—need to be acknowledged and given airtime.

Before you select stories, you first have to capture them (with permission, of course) if they are not your own. Collect them in a journal or on note cards (makes them easy to sort later on).

Within the organization, they may be housed in print or online publications, on audiotapes or videotapes, or on CDs or DVDs.

City Year, a citizen service corps in the U.S., created a booklet of 21 universal stories from around the world that link it to its origins, represent its civic values and engagement strategy, and serve as a foundation for its future work. Called *Founding Stories,* it marks the organization's 15th anniversary and international expansion plans. Through its Leadership Legacy initiative, the U.S.'s Environmental Protection Agency has captured lessons learned and best practices in various environmental areas in one-on-one, professionally facilitated, videotaped interviews with 60 executives who are slated to retire and who have worked over the course the agency's 35-year history.

Keep in mind when capturing stories digitally or electronically that they need to be systematically coded for retrieval. The Kentucky League of Cities attaches keywords to stories it plans to use internally and with the media that aid in searching a database of several hundred stories.

As you assist your organization with selecting specific stories to reinforce key messages, find ways to help leaders choose them in a deliberate manner. Be open to all the stories that come your way. While some may not be fit for external use, they might have important roles to play with staff.

CRAFTING STORIES

Stories have a pattern. They have a beginning that establishes the context and hooks the listener, a middle that showcases the conflict, and an ending that brings resolution to the situation and provides a lesson—a moral or key point.

From a communication perspective, there are several things to consider when

crafting stories, whether your own or others'. First, meaning cannot be superimposed on a story. It needs to come from those most closely involved with it. Second, even with this identified meaning, listeners will still draw their own conclusions. To this end, be conscious of both the stated and the unintended consequence meanings associated with the story. Finally, while you always want to be true to the essence of a real story, it's OK to embellish some of the details of the story to make it more memorable in people's minds and to bring its key point alive, as long as ethical guidelines of truth telling are upheld.

It can be beneficial to have different lengths of the same story to address various audiences. A longer version may fit perfectly within a print publication.

EMBODYING THE STORIES

Telling a story in person is one way of embodying it. It is, in fact, preferable to video, audio, and print due to the power of nonverbal communication and the interaction between the speaker and the listener. But these are not the only means of sharing stories.

For several years at the annual conference of the National Speakers Association, an empty chair was placed in the front row at general sessions. At my first conference, I asked people at my table why the video camera operators panned the empty chair when a mainstage speaker would make a comment and look in its direction. The answer was that the chair was a visual reminder of the organization's founder, Cavett Roberts, who had passed away. I came to learn about his passion and the values he brought to the organization through stories passed on by longtime members.

Symbolism—in the form of an empty chair, photographs, paintings, a skit,

relics, and other tangible objects–provides a vehicle by which a story can travel and self-perpetuate. You know the power associated with this form of communication. What symbols represent stories in your organization? The shoes worn by the nursing staff? The first check received in payment for services rendered? The first item to roll off an assembly line? Your real challenge becomes finding ways to capitalize on this power in a positive fashion, with employees and customers or clients, and perhaps even shareholders.

PROCEEDING STRATEGICALLY

While these five practices emerged from the interviews that were conducted, no single organization used all five of them. This leaves a significant opportunity for you and your organization. How can you employ these five practices at a strategic level within your enterprise? How could they be applied to the work processes in your department? How could they be used within a special project that you lead? And what can you do to use them in your own work? The applications for story are as vast as your imagination.

THE RESULTS ARE IN: STORIES AFFECT ROI

For the book *Wake Me Up When the Data Is Over*, 72 organizations provided examples of how they use stories. Topic areas included customer service, human capital, marketing and marketing research, branding, teamwork, leadership development, financial management, project management, organizational change, difficult issues, history and core values, and strategy. Individuals considered story pioneers were interviewed, along with people who are leaders in the field of story work in organizations. The research focused on organizations that consciously used stories for business purposes and whose examples had not been previously published.

While many of these organizations did not systematically collect data to show the success of story use or tease out the impact of story use from other aspects of their efforts, all have seen positive results. And many have experienced more than one type of impact. For example, Kimpton Hotel and Restaurant Group reports doubling the number of its hotels to 40 in the last five years and is poised to double in size again. Fifty-five percent of its customers are returning guest, whereas the average rate in the service industry is 20 to 25 percent. And, independent survey results show turnover at Kimpton Hotels is lower than any other major hotel company in the U.S. when compared to industry standards. Kimpton primarily uses story to define and communicate its brand, as well as for other business purposes.

Here are the highlights across all organizations:

- 36 percent have experienced positive financial impact to the bottom line through increased growth, profitability, and/or increased funding.

- 18 percent have noted that story has moved them closer to furthering specific organizational goals.

- 17 percent have reported increased levels of engagement between people and the organization and/or higher levels of teamwork.

- 17 percent are able to show a positive impact on the amount and type of customer feedback, improved customer satisfaction and/or improved customer perceptions of the brand.

- 11 percent have experienced decreased workflow cycle time, improved speed of message delivery or time to market, and increased efficiencies.

- 10 percent reported an impact on training feedback and effectiveness, including transfer of skills and knowledge to the workplace.

- 8 percent noted positive cultural changes.

Other results include increased visibility through media or industry awards and rankings, closing more deals with clients, improved staff retention, practical problem solving, bringing core values to life, overcoming issues, improved employee satisfaction, and decreased employee absenteeism.

USING THE FIVE SIDES OF STORY: A CASE STUDY

How can organizations link together various facets of the five sides of story—finding stories, digging into them, selecting them, crafting them, and embodying them—and integrate them into a larger initiative? Here's one example that embraces several of these approaches.

In 2003, Major Mark Tribus, an officer in the Personnel Management System Task Force of the U.S. Army Human Resources Command, was the brigade personnel officer for 4,000 soldiers to be deployed to Afghanistan. Tribus teamed up with colleagues from companycommand.com, a forum that facilitates an ongoing professional conversation among past, current, and future commanders about leading soldiers and building combat-ready units. They constructed a leadership development program for 70 of the brigade's key leaders that used stories to help prepare them and their troops for the situation they would face.

First, Tribus had the key leaders read the book *Taliban: Militant Islam, Oil and Fundamentalism in Central Asia*, to give them some context about where they were going, and to instill awareness of the culture. Then, Tribus and his colleagues asked the group of 70 key leaders to submit questions they had about their upcoming deployment. They sent the questions to 100 company commanders who had served in Afghanistan; about 50 percent of the responses included short stories. The team extracted overarching themes from these stories and then compiled the stories into a book that was given to the 70 leaders.

To reinforce the information from the book, Tribus and his team brought in six of the company commanders who had provided stories. After a day of practicing their stories orally, the commanders presented them to the group of 70 leaders, making sure to include accounts of the effect that the experience had on soldiers. A day later, the commanders also visited with individual units to answer questions about what they had presented. Following this, each taught workshops in their area of expertise.

By evoking stories from experienced commanders, selecting those that were the most meaningful and digging into them for themes, and embodying different types of stories in interesting ways, Tribus augmented what the new leaders already knew about the situation on the ground in Afghanistan in a memorable and meaningful fashion.

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