

How business can benefit from great storytelling

By [Shayne Mann](#), issued by [Mann Made](#) 18 Sep 2012

Storytelling is an ancient art - we humans have used it to entertain, educate and record our foibles for thousand of years. Naturally, the mediums through which we spin our elaborate (or not so elaborate) yarns have changed evolving from cave paintings to 140 character Tweets and tackily shot YouTube videos.



Unsurprisingly, given its proven ability to influence behaviour and transform attitudes and approaches, the business world has fully embraced storytelling. In fact, it is now a compulsory course in your standard MBA.

"Storytelling is the single most powerful communications tool we have," explains Andy Goodman from the Good Man Centre. "Stories are part of our history, our identity, and our culture. More than anything else, stories help us remember. So when you have a very important message, to convey a good story is more powerful than a 50-slide PowerPoint presentation."

This is why storytelling is being adopted by business leaders to strengthen culture, engage employees, attract new customers and effect positive behavioural change. For example, when you are inspiring your sales force to achieve something great and you want them to share the company's vision, an inspirational leader will tell a motivating story about the company's origin to get the team fired up.

So what are the ingredients of great storytelling?

Passion and purpose

Steve Jobs was a great storyteller, primarily because he passionately believed in what he was saying and the value of his ideas. You need to show emotion and excitement in order to get your audience to truly buy into what you are saying. Don't be afraid to let your audience feel what you feel. Use very descriptive adjectives such as "amazing", "incredible", "unreal" and "brilliant". If the message is negative, use equally dramatic language to convey the message. The key to making your story engaging is to connect with your audience emotionally. For the less 'performance' savvy, this may require some training, but it will be well worth the investment.

The importance of delivery

"Two people can recite the same set of words, but their volume, tone, pitch, and pace of speaking can completely alter the message that is being conveyed." Steven Handel

In other words, how you say something is as important as what you are saying. An actor delivering a monologue of about five minutes can rehearse for four days for that performance. He/she will work on body language and tone of voice, and when to pause in order to lift and separate points. However, the average presenter will go onto stage without having rehearsed his/her presentation from start to finish - which is a terrible mistake to make.

Yet some business leaders simply refuse to rehearse, stating that "it's not their style". In this instance, it helps to work out the actual cost per minute of being on stage. Take into account the salary bill of the audience in the room, the accommodation, travel, production and eventing costs. You almost always arrive at an astonishingly large number. Given this 'investment', it

foolhardy not to invest some time into perfecting the presentation. Steve Jobs, while a natural showman, still obsessively rehearsed his product presentations beforehand, paying attention to every last detail. As a result, he had even the most skeptical of cynics eating out of his hand by the end.

Number-crunching

Numbers, unless they are placed in some sort of context, mean nothing to most mortals. So they need to be brought down earth and made relevant. Simply putting up complicated graphs is not going to engage your audience. For example, when Jobs launched the iPod, he didn't focus on the amount of gigabytes the iPod could hold, he spoke about 1000 songs in your pocket - which is something we can all relate to.

Be authentic

In order to stick, storytelling has to be 100% authentic. In today's hyper-connected world, people are knowledgeable and informed. So don't even try to spin something that is not bullet-proof. Before you present anything as fact, make sure to check and double check that you've got it right. This includes making sure that your statistics and quotes are from reputable reliable sources.

Know thy audience

The other important factor to consider is your audience. Who are you talking to? What do they care about? What questions would they be asking before they had the opportunity to hear your story? Try to answer these questions in your presentation and to deal with issues that are relevant and of immediate consequence to your audience.

Invite interaction

The best storytellers engage the audience and find creative ways to interact with them. For example, invite comments and questions, and ask your own questions. Or, develop shorter presentations with more time for Q&A. Various voting mechanisms can also get the audience more involved. Attention spans are short, and interactions are a great way to get around this.

If you can build all of these elements into your presentation, you are well on your way to becoming the corporate equivalent of Scheherazade.

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