

Why stories help to change minds

 By [Donna-Rae Patricios](#)

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The art of storytelling is integral to marketing now. It is espoused by branding and communication leaders the world over, who point to humanity's thousands of years of relying on stories to capture and convey information.

But why is storytelling so powerful? What is particular to this form of communication that makes it so compelling and influential?

Kerry Patterson's book 'Influencer' provides insight into people and their propensity to change behaviour. According to Patterson, the key requirements to influence personal behaviour are:

- Personal motivation - A relevant, personal need or an opportunity that represents a significant benefit.
- Personal ability - The belief that the behaviour is achievable within the individual's personal capability.
- Social credibility - Trust in the motives of the person or entity trying to exact change.
- Structural ability - The environmental factors that enable or support the behaviours.

Storytelling appears to be particularly well suited to the task of changing behaviour. Stories connect with our emotions and help people look at the world in new ways. When told well, they stimulate vicarious experience - so much more than mere information exchange.

Evolutionary research has found, in fact, that stories are integral to our emotional and empathetic development. As the next best thing to real experience, they have the ability to provide significant personal motivation if the listener relates to what is being told.

But not every story changes minds. We've all been cornered by a co-worker or relative who couldn't tell a story to save his life. So what is it that makes certain stories so powerful, while mere verbal persuasion can cause resistance or be quickly dismissed and forgotten?

1. Understanding

Whenever you try to convince others through verbal persuasion, the language you use can reproduce in the mind of the listener differently to how you had intended it.

You say your words but others hear their words, stimulating their images, histories and overall meaning. In addition, many of us try to bring customers around to our way of thinking in short, punchy statements that strip much of the detail from

what we are trying to convey.

The details, however, are where the richly emotive and influential magic lie - the rest is cold, lifeless information.

A well-told story provides clear and vivid detail. It changes people's view because it presents plausible, touching and memorable flows of cause and effect; action and consequence.

2. Believing

People become less willing to believe what you say the moment they realise your goal is to convince them. This phenomenon is particularly pronounced in the case of marketing, where the message is often seen as benefitting the business alone.

Told well, stories can help listeners drop their doubts as to the credibility of the speaker or the solution being proposed. Research conducted by Dr Ray Price and Dr Joanne Martin found that when three groups of students were given exactly the same information - the first through verbal facts and figures, the second through charts and tables and the third through the story of an old winemaker - those who had heard the story not only recalled more detail than the other groups, but they also found the information to be more credible.

Why? Because stories transport people in such a way that they drop their logical analysis and criticism, and get absorbed into the story itself.

3. Motivating

The final reason why stories are more influential than persuasion is their ability to link to human emotion. Convincing others to understand your point of view is often not enough to propel them into action.

People need to care about what you're saying for them to do something out of their routine. If emotions don't kick in - people simply don't act.

Brands need to learn to master the art of storytelling, and perhaps even to embrace the storyteller archetype as part of their brand character.

The storyteller brings pleasure to all by bringing events to life. Part sage, part entertainer - he lives to educate and delight. He sees meaning in the smallest things, and finds commonality between different facets of life and people.

He can help audiences identify with the central character, and creates detailed worlds that connect with customers' emotions because they feel both real, relatable, and different enough to capture their imagination.

ABOUT DONNA-RAE PATRICIOS

After completing a post graduate copywriting diploma in 1996 from AAA, Donna-Rae was determined there would be a Loerie with her name on it someday. But a week as an intern in the strategy department at The Jupiter Drawing Room, and she was hooked on planning.

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