

CHAPTER 1

**So why
are stories
important?**

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**Stories
unlock the
emotion in all
communication.**

‘Those who tell the stories rule society.’ That is not a content marketer talking today, but a bold statement from the Greek philosopher Plato, who was born in 428 BC. Stories have been with us forever in the history of the world and throughout our own lives. The *Macquarie Dictionary* defines story as ‘a narrative, either true or fictitious, in prose or verse, designed to interest, instruct, or amuse the hearer or reader’.

To amuse and instruct our children, we read or make up stories for them. When someone’s life ends, we share stories about them in the eulogy at their funeral and over drinks at their wake.

The most powerful leaders understand how stories disrupt our emotions and convince people to share their views. Mahatma Gandhi inspired the Indian people and changed their country forever, not by starting a war, but by showing them how he lived and by transforming people’s way of thinking through his stories and speeches. Equally, he was always curious and ready to listen to other people’s stories.

Addressing the All India Congress Committee at Bombay on 8 August 1942, Mahatma Gandhi said:

I have no weapon but love to wield my authority over anyone.
I do sport a stick which you can break into bits without the slightest exertion.

It is simply my staff with the help of which I walk. Such a cripple is not elated, when he has been called upon to bear the greatest burden. You can share that burden only when I appear before you not as your commander but as a humble servant. And he who serves best is the chief among equals.

Therefore I was bound to share with you, such thoughts as were welling up in my breast and tell you in as summary a manner as I can, what I expect you to do as the first step.

Sharing his thoughts, hardships and emotions in speeches such as this famous example, Gandhi helped bring about India's independence from Britain. He used his own, personal stories to help transform a nation.

A call to action

The best salespeople in the world create global anticipation for their new products through their stories. In his keynote presentation to launch the iPhone at MacWorld in 2007, Steve Jobs started with the words, 'This is a day I've been looking forward to for two and a half years', immediately sharing his emotions with his audience. Then, in a few carefully chosen words, he showed the history of Apple from 1984 to that day when he launched what he described as three 'revolutionary products'. A master at sharing his stories, Jobs used his body language, his choice of strong, emotive words and his distinctive delivery style to show his audience that what was coming next would be so much more than simply a new type of telephone.

Hearing a story makes us look at things in a different way; it's a call to action for us to buy that product or those services, or engage with someone and their ideas and experiences. It brings us right into the world of the person who is sharing their story. As speakers, as marketers, as businesspeople or as leaders we know that to get our message across and to persuade our clients, customers or students we must use a story. It is integral to any sales strategy now, just as it is an intrinsic part of a keynote talk or a presentation.

Corporate stories are just as important as a company's name and logo. Likewise, the stories that customers tell about the service, or that employees tell about their work experience, can support or corrupt a company's branding and reputation. Success stories, campaign stories, life stories, corporate histories, motivational, inspirational or problem-solving stories: there are so many forms of story that businesses and corporations develop and use. Sales

staff—or anyone who builds relationships with others—have to create a story that will both motivate and inspire their clients. Stories are about people, about who we are and what we feel; they are about what we have experienced in the highs and lows of our lives. Compelling stories show our emotions, our vulnerability and our authenticity.

The power of emotions

It's clear that we need stories, so maybe we should consider the question 'Why are stories important?' another way. What happens if we don't share our story with emotion and with our hearts?

Remember the story about my first speaking engagement? I thought I was awesome up there on the stage, fully prepared with statistics and all my other research. I was serious and I was going to impress my audience. Well, that didn't happen; instead, they were polite and underwhelmed.

I knew that something was wrong with my speech, but I really couldn't identify what it was. Looking back, I can see that I was trying too hard, and in doing that I was focused too much on the head and not enough on the heart. I was not sharing my vulnerability or my emotions. I didn't realise that I needed to connect with my audience rather than simply inform them. I was certainly entertaining them, but that was not enough. I couldn't work out what I should do after that event—all I had was the feedback that I was average and no-one was rushing up to book me again. So I decided I had to polish my message more. Then I thought maybe I just needed to be funnier, so I came up with more jokes. Next, I went out and got training, at home and overseas, on speaking.

That was all useful, but I knew there was still something I just wasn't getting. The pivotal moment of change—the instant when I realised what I had to do—came when I met a writing coach in New York City named Marilyn Horowitz.

I went to a conference called 'Author 101' in Los Angeles, California, and that's where I heard Professor Marilyn Horowitz give a talk about writing. After the event I went to New York City to speak at an event and I realised that Professor Horowitz was based in New York. Through persistence and grit, I managed to find her and she agreed to meet me. I took her out to lunch and told her about the book I was writing (which eventually became *Bounce Forward*) and about my car accident and what I had been doing since then. I said I had won Young Australian of the Year, I was a speaker and I'd overcome my accident easily and never looked back!

And then Professor Horowitz asked me how I really got through the accident and the months of rehab.

I said, 'Well, I just overcame it, it was easy, you know, I just simply got over it.'

She asked me the same question again; she asked how I got through it all, really.

I kept telling her and in a way she didn't believe me and I didn't get what she was going on about.

Then Marilyn asked me something that came as a total surprise. She asked me to think about the little boy inside me. She wanted me to consider what that little boy would say about the accident and the year I spent in a wheelchair and the whole recovery process.

I stopped talking and thought. Then I asked, 'What do you mean?'

Marilyn explained that when I talked about this crisis point in my life I sounded as if I did not have any emotional connection to what I had gone through. It was as if I didn't care about myself and wasn't able to acknowledge or talk about all the emotions I had felt as I slowly recovered and picked up my life again. She made me realise that I was saying 'I got over the accident quickly and continued with my life, and now I'm this happy individual.' Maybe that's what I did believe before I talked to her,

and I thought it was okay, but that wouldn't help me to express my real feelings as a writer.

Or as a speaker.

Marilyn Horowitz made me aware of the power of my emotions. She made me think about how and why to bring emotions into my story. She showed me why I should allow myself to be vulnerable and authentic in front of an audience. That's when I realised that jokes and facts and figures aren't enough. They are merely entertainment and information. Instead, I had to truly share my story. In a story you take the listener with you, even when your journey is hard, sad or painful. You need to show how you changed during your journey because of the obstacles you encountered.

An Indian storyteller, Jeeva Raghunath, said something that I agree with 100 per cent: 'Stories are not from head to head, they are from heart to heart. Every story has a soul. It has life.'

Other speakers have had similar experiences to what I went through when I gave my first major talk to that group at the Gold Coast. My colleague Drew Wade is a great speaker, but she only began to connect with her audience when she stopped confusing context for story. She remembers how she felt when she started.

DREW WADE'S STORY

I'd just become qualified as a dating and relationships coach and this was my first speaking engagement. I felt the information I had could make or break relationships so I was committed to getting it across.

I told the historic context of my story and then went straight into presenting the hard facts. The statistics were overwhelming. I even used different types of chocolate to represent different grades of relationships, because I thought that would be a fun way to demonstrate my points.

(continued)

My style was warm and engaging, but the audience was looking blank; I could see they weren't receiving the message. My delivery was not as compelling as it should have been. I was hitting a brick wall and couldn't understand why. I'd done my research and preparation, I had good intentions and I'd given it my best shot. I had everything I thought I needed. Knowing I'd failed to communicate what I had to say made me want to crawl into the foetal position and hide.

The talk was missing something. It was missing a heartfelt story that had audience relevance. I thought I was doing that. But actually, all I was doing was explaining the context. I was telling them everything I had researched: 'This principle is that; this is important; these are the facts and data; this is what you've got to know.'

Sam coached me and I learned how an audience hears emotions and how to incorporate relevant vulnerability into my personal experience.

Some months later, I spoke on the same topic, but this time I used stories of my own experience, woven with the facts. I shared the sweaty-palmed exuberance of my first kiss, vividly re-creating what I had gone through. This time around, the audience could see and feel what I had felt. It was relatable and they could connect with my message. It took them to a place where they felt nostalgic for their own experiences, and were then able to apply my knowledge to their lives.

Once I realised that I had to present data within an authentic story, and lead people through my own vulnerability, it became simple. I was a classic case of someone who thought that telling the story was more important than taking someone on the emotional journey. Now I know that making that emotional connection is essential.

Stories disrupt

All stories are disruptive. They disrupt our way of thinking so that by the time we have finished listening to a story about someone or something, we will be looking at them differently.

In 2010, Sheryl Sandberg, COO of Facebook, gave a TEDWomen talk titled ‘Why we have too few women leaders’. What’s interesting is what happened backstage before the talk. She was standing next to Pat Mitchell, a former president of CNN Productions and host of the global TEDWomen conference. Just before walking on stage, Sandberg turned to Mitchell and said she’d been having a tough time. The last straw was when her three-year-old daughter clung to her leg, asking her to stay and not wanting to let go as Sheryl was about to board a flight to go and give her TED talk the next day. She told Mitchell this because they were friends, not because she thought the experience had anything to do with the subject she was going to talk about in a few minutes’ time. Immediately, Pat Mitchell said that she really should share that story. Sandberg remembers that the speech she was planning on giving was ‘chock full of facts and figures, and nothing personal’.

In her interview with Pat Mitchell about her first TED Talk, Sheryl Sandberg went on to explain that she didn’t believe Mitchell at first but when she asked her friend if she really meant she should go out and tell the TED audience the story about her daughter, Mitchell said, ‘Yes, because if you want to talk about getting more women into leadership roles, you have to be honest about how hard it is.’

You, along with the more than six million people who have watched Sandberg’s talk, can see the power of sharing a personal story. Ask yourself, would you respond more immediately and feel motivated to do something about the issue of getting more women into leadership roles if you listened to a talk filled with data and research, or a story about a little girl clinging to her

mother's leg and leaving the mum feeling guilty for trying to juggle all the elements of her life?

Working women would immediately identify with Sandberg—empathise with her and catch what she was saying. Many men could identify with her too, or at least see that one of the most powerful women in the social media world faces the same juggling act that other working parents have to deal with. Personal, vulnerable, emotional stories connect people and can transform our way of thinking more powerfully than lists of figures. Screenwriter and author Robert McKee says, 'I'd rather hear a fact woven beautifully into a story than look at a pie chart.' What do you think?

Dr Paul J Zak tells us, 'To motivate, persuade, or be remembered, start with a story of human struggle and eventual triumph. It will capture people's hearts—by first attracting their brains.' Dr Zak, who is the founding director of the Center for Neuroeconomics Studies at Claremont Graduate University, wondered why stories affect the way we think. To answer this question he investigated ways that stories can change our behaviour, beliefs and attitudes. In Dr Zak's research it was discovered that your brain produces a neurochemical, oxytocin, when someone shows trust or kindness towards you. It tells the body that this person comes as a friend, not a threat. Also, it lets the brain know to cooperate with that person by building a feeling of empathy with them. It helps you to feel the emotions that another person is experiencing.

What happens if you take this further and tell the brain a narrative—a story? By doing this, could you encourage people to cooperate more with each other? These were the questions Dr Zak and his team wanted to answer. They discovered that 'character-driven stories do consistently cause oxytocin synthesis'. How much oxytocin the brain released was an indication of the extent to which 'people were willing to help others; for example, donating money to a charity associated with the narrative'.

Zak and his team went on to discover that in order to motivate someone to help others the story must sustain attention by developing tension. If there is tension, it is likely the viewer, listener or reader will come to share the emotions of the characters in the story. The insurance salesman in that café in Launceston knew exactly how to use stories to transform my thinking, by bringing in emotion, drawing on fear and developing tension to the point where I had a choice: to buy the insurance or be left feeling that I was a bad father. And for that I will be forever grateful to him, as it happens.

Even after a story has come to an end, according to Zak, the listener continues to mimic the feelings and behaviour of the characters. Think about characters from movies you've seen and books you've read who you can still bring to mind years after hearing their story. Many people say they can recall reading or hearing an outstanding story that they say changed their life. Gregory S Berns and his team of researchers at Emory University in the United States have even detected biological traces that may be related to this feeling: actual changes in the brain that linger, at least for a few days, after reading a novel.

The neural changes that we found associated with physical sensation and movement systems suggest that reading a novel can transport you into the body of the protagonist. We already knew that good stories can put you in someone else's shoes in a figurative sense. Now we're seeing that something may also be happening biologically.

Like Zak's team, Berns and his colleagues also found that the listener or reader will develop an empathy with the characters that grows while they are listening to the story, and it will stay with them after it has ended. As a professional speaker I share my own story with audiences around the world, and I have seen how people connect with my journey. In 2013 I was invited to speak to an audience of 8000 people at a conference in Japan. At the end I was handed an envelope from an audience member.

After I jumped on the plane to fly back to Australia, I took the envelope out of my bag and opened it. Inside was a letter.

In it, the woman who had just heard my talk wrote that the last few months had been devastating for her. Her marriage was over, she had lost contact with her children, she didn't have any money and, really, she had no desire to live anymore. Now, this is the amazing thing for me, in the letter she explained that she didn't know why she had come along to the talk but for some reason she just decided to. It was going to be the last thing she ever did, before taking her own life. Apparently she had planned to carry out her suicide that night.

I was overwhelmed with emotion as I read her words where she told me that my own story about bouncing forward from my accident had given her hope and transformed her way of thinking. Just as I had pushed through my crisis she realised that she could too, and she now understood that her life was worthwhile. I was reading this and tears were running down my face, then I read the last line, where she thanked me for saving her life.

Stories can inspire and influence and even save and heal. They can transform thinking and engage a generation towards what's possible. They can rip down and build up; they are the cornerstone to religious beliefs, the backbone of culture and the essence of motivation. From the stories we tell ourselves to the stories we hear, see and show, stories are the greatest way to discover, uncover and learn about the things that are unique to each of us, as well as what we have in common.