

Chapter 1

The Scoop on Business Storytelling

In This Chapter

- ▶ Highlighting the role of story in the new economy
 - ▶ Identifying the best definition of a story
 - ▶ Connecting story to the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual
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Is storytelling a tool, a technique, or a core competence and a business strategy? We believe it's all of the above. More and more businesses are recognizing that storytelling is more than giving presentation skills to managers and staff. They're acknowledging it's a critical capability in effectively leading an organization. That working with stories requires an overall strategy that addresses *why* and *what*, in addition to building skills that speak to *how*. That storytelling in marketing, branding, and sales is about engagement, listening, and creating storied experiences to sustain customer loyalty and profits. That stories provide deep, rich, and meaningful experiences for people if crafted and told well. And that stories can be the wellspring for change and help unite a community around an organization.

Storytelling's Role in Business



For years, businesses have realized that story can mean big money. In the 1995 article, “One Quarter of GDP Is Persuasion,” economists Deirdre McClosky and Arjo Klamer calculated that persuasion activities (advertising, public relations, sales, editing, writing, art making, and so on) accounted for 25 percent of the U.S. gross domestic product (*American Economic Review*, vol. 85, No. 2). Author Steven Denning, formerly of the World Bank, conjectures in *The Leader's Guide To Storytelling: Mastering the Art and Discipline of Business Narrative* (Jossey-Bass, 2011), that if half of that amount is devoted to story, then storytelling is worth \$2.25 trillion annually (www.stevedenning.com/Documents/Leader-Foreword.pdf). A 2013 review of literature relating to McClosky and Klamer's research suggests this persuasion number is

closer to 30 percent of the U.S. gross domestic product, which equates to \$4.5 trillion annually (www.treasury.gov.au/PublicationsAndMedia/Publications/2013/Economic-Roundup-Issue-1/Report/Persuasion-is-now-30-per-cent-of-US-GDP). These numbers alone are enough to pay attention to storytelling!

Getting in on the storytelling action



How does this mountain of money that's being spent on persuasive communications — which could be devoted to business storytelling — translate to organizational work? Dan Pink, the author of the *New York Times* best-seller *A Whole New Mind: Why Right Brainers Will Rule the Future* (Berkley Publishing Group, 2006) says business is entering a new age marked by the need to do the following:

- ✓ Use synthesis to detect patterns and opportunities for new innovations
- ✓ Create artistic and emotional beauty (think Apple)
- ✓ Craft a meaningful satisfying narrative through story
- ✓ Empathize with others
- ✓ Provide purpose and meaning in both work and the products and services consumed
- ✓ Replace seriousness with play

He goes on to state that desktop PCs and automated business processes have heightened the value of two types of skills. In *expert thinking*, new problems are solved for which routine solutions do not exist. In *complex communication*, interpreting information, explaining, persuading, and influencing becomes essential to success. Storytelling builds competency in both skills.



Futurist Rolf Jensen also explores this need. In his book *The Dream Society: How the Coming Shift from Information to Imagination Will Transform Your Business* (McGraw-Hill, 1999), he states, “The successful employee of the future is a virtuoso at acquiring and conveying knowledge, and coalescing and improving the work environment. The employee who, through telling stories about the organization’s results, manages to strengthen corporate culture will be considered a valuable asset. Nothing so inspires an organization as an enlivening story relating how the whopping contract was finally won, despite adversity and horrendous odds. The storyteller creates corporate culture.” He goes on to say, “Anyone seeking success in the market of the future will have to be a storyteller. The story is the heart of the matter.”

When it comes to business offerings, story is front and center for Rolf Jensen. He talks about a shift from generating products or services and then telling a story about them to *first* focusing on the story that will *then* generate the product or service. For him, the next generation of experience is when a com-

pany and its customers are selling the story together as co-storytellers, with engagement driving sales.



Jensen cites Harley-Davidson as an example. In 1999, the Harley story was about transportation. Today, the Harley Owners Group (HOG), a collection of more than 1,400 groups, encourages its members to tell a much broader lifestyle story around the theme “born to be wild.” This broader story serves as the background to video anecdotes (these don’t contain all the elements of a story as explained in Chapter 3) about individual women riders who have created one-of-a-kind H-D motorcycles. You can view them at www.harley-davidson.com/en_US/Content/Pages/women-riders/the-right-bike.html.

How storytelling can help your business



In *The Experience Economy: Work Is Theater & Every Business a Stage* (Harvard Business School Press, 1999), Joseph Pine and James Gilmore reinforce this shift with its emphasis on story when they say, “Every business competing for the future is customer centric, customer driven, customer focused, customer-yadda-yadda-yadda. So what’s new? This is new: Experiences represent an existing but previously unarticulated *genre of economic output* (author emphasis).”



Stories are experiences. When you share a story, you relive an experience and invite others to share in it with you. In this way, you move people from focusing on the tangible and intangible qualities of products and services to memorableness. And today’s customers want memorable experiences. They want to engage with organizations that reveal themselves. Buyers perceive greater value when the experience lingers in their memory.

There’s also a second outcome: Stories, when crafted well, can be transformational. Over time, as customers interact with your product or service, their lives will change — perhaps even transform — hopefully for the better. This happens when your enterprise helps each of them aspire to a happier place. We talk more about this transformation later in this chapter and in Chapter 14 when we cover using story in marketing. For an enterprise to help customers in this new way implies moving the organization from a mindset of sparking sales to embodying qualities connected to these stories that all parties can share — which has lasting consequence beyond the immediate consumption of a product or service.

Nutritious stories versus junk food stories

Every day, you’re surrounded by entertaining junk food stories that leave you wanting more. Think of the latest zombie or vampire movies, reality TV shows, or other stuff on TV or the cinema that excite you or make you laugh.

Notice that they don't make you say, "A-ha!" or, "Oh, now I get it," or "Ahhh, that's deep." Like soda and potato chips, junk food stories briefly satisfy an immediate craving. Don't get us wrong — a little junk food is fine. But you're usually hungry again later on.



Junk food doesn't build health; it can lead to a host of maladies. In the same way, junk food stories also create maladies, which can include narrow thinking, distorted views of reality, exploitation, arrested development, and even stereotyping (more on this topic at <http://uxstorytellers.blogspot.fr/2012/06/danger-of-single-story.html>).

Good nutrition nourishes your body, making you feel energized, alive, and happy. Similarly, *sustaining stories* are those that feed you well. They nourish and sustain your psyche, spirit, and relationships with others, leading to higher levels of aspiration, and more energy, aliveness, meaning, and satisfaction.

One of the goals of this book is to steer you away from junk food stories toward sustaining stories. We want to help you craft and tell deeply satisfying, meaningful stories to sustain your organization over the long haul. Storytelling isn't merely a tool or device to use once in a while. It's an essential strategy and competence for all organizations to survive and thrive. The age of storytelling has arrived.

How We Define Story

There are many definitions of story in the field, which often leads to confusion. To bring clarity about what we mean by story and why we use the definition that we do, let's review a few definitions. The *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary* defines story as follows:

1: a history such as a: an account of incidents or events; b: a statement regarding the facts pertinent to a situation in question; c: anecdote especially and amusing one; 2a: a fictional narrative shorter than a novel; b: the intrigue or plot of a narrative or dramatic work; 3a: a widely circulated rumor; 4: a lie or falsehood; 5: legend or romance; 6: a news article or broadcast.

his definition doesn't tell us too much that's helpful. It includes several narrative forms like anecdotes and works of fiction, genres like legends, romance, and news articles, and a statement of facts or an accounting of an event. This is a descriptive definition — it describes various types of stories. But it doesn't help us understand what a story really is and what it does.

Not everything is a story

It's popular in some circles to say that *everything* is a story. That's simply not true. Most of your daily life isn't a story. Many of your conversations aren't stories. A lot of what you read isn't a story. And they don't have to be. But if you want to turn a human event into a story, then you need to pay attention to the specific process for creating a story. Story is simply a way of structuring information in order to create context and relevance, engage listeners, be memorable, and generate some nugget of meaning.

In today's business world, as you'll see in Chapter 2, without a story you get diminished results. But telling a story is only half the equation. You also need to be listening for stories. As you'll find out in Chapter 5, you need to listen to the stories your colleagues, prospects, and customers share with you so you can discover their needs and then meet them.

In his book *Story Proof: The Science Behind the Startling Power of Story* (Libraries Unlimited, 2007), Kendall Haven offers another definition of story:

Story: n.: A detailed, character-based narration of a character's struggles to overcome obstacles and reach an important goal.

This is a structural definition — it's about the elements that create a story. Quite often, you'll see definitions of this type. They say for a story to be a story it must have a plot, characters, emotion, a problem, and a resolution. Even though this helps us get closer to understanding what a story is, structural definitions only focus on what comprises a story — its elements. These types of definitions often become a laundry list of ingredients that don't help you craft and tell better stories and don't help you understand what a story really is and what it does.

Here's our definition of story that we use throughout this book:

"A story provides packets of sensory language presented in a particular way that allows the listener to quickly and easily internalize the material, comprehend it, and create meaning from it."

This is a dynamic definition of story. When you focus on the results that occur from telling stories, then you understand what the story is supposed to do for you — which is why you tell them in the first place. Why do we prefer this definition? It focuses on what a storyteller is actually trying to achieve. When you know why you want to share stories, you have the context for understanding the elements of a story and can construct them with more confidence.

How Stories Impact People

Every day, you're bombarded with tons of so-called stories. Not all are worth attending to — poorly crafted stories are a dime a dozen. If you want your stories to stand out from the crowd, upping your storytelling game is essential. Upping your game means crafting stories that impact people in four ways simultaneously: physically, intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually.

The physical impact



In *Wake Me Up When the Data Is Over: How Organizations Use Stories to Drive Results* (Jossey-Bass, 2006), Arthur L. Major, director of System Safety at Lockheed Martin Space Systems, describes the physical behavior he observed in senior leaders when he wove stories throughout a presentation on what he planned to do to reduce mishaps and near misses. “I saw executives lean forward, put their pens down, look at me and listen.” He goes on to say, “Their behavior changed because I changed the way I presented.”

These executives settled in to listen. They were attentive because they wanted to know where his stories were going. At the same time, their behavior demonstrated that they were open and receptive to the experience and what they were hearing. Sure enough: These executives approved his approach for another year.

As story coaches, speakers, and trainers, we as authors have been privileged to present a number of compelling stories to audiences and to watch groups of people as they listen to a compelling story. Listeners noticeably shift their physical behavior. They may lean in or sit back. They stop what they're doing — they stop taking notes, put down electronic devices, and cease having conversations. They often stare directly at the person who's telling them a story. Sometimes the room becomes very quiet. Other audiences may mutter things like “Wow,” “That's unbelievable,” or, “Really?” They may laugh — or cry. In any case, all their physical behaviors point to a deeper kind of listening in the moment.

The mental impact



What are these listeners processing? Here's what Princeton University neuroscientists Greg Stephens and Uri Hasson (*Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, July 27, 2010) found when they took brain scans of a graduate student telling a 15-minute unrehearsed story and those listening to a recording of it (www.pnas.org/content/107/32/14425). Although speaking and listening are known to invoke different brain functions, “On average, the listener's brain responses mirrored the speaker's brain responses with some

time delays. The delays matched the flow of [the] information.” They also found that an additional area of the listener’s brain is lit up — the part that anticipates what’s next. That didn’t happen in the teller’s brain.

What does this mean? The speaker’s words actually shape how the listener’s brain responds to what’s said. This is groundbreaking! It implies that stories create an immediate connection between people.



Citing evidence from more than 350 studies in fields such as cognitive science, neural psychology, and brain development, in *Story Proof* Kendall Haven says our reliance on story through the ages has caused a rewiring of the human brain such that it’s predisposed to think in terms of story. Story is how the brain creates meaning. This predisposition is strengthened through hearing and telling stories in childhood.

Think about it. If listeners’ brain responses are mirroring the teller’s brain responses almost instantaneously — like a mind meld — and the human brain is predisposed to think in terms of story, that implies that you pay closer attention when you hear a story. Once you connect to and link the story to your memories and past experiences, meaning-making occurs. Imagine the influences that this revelation can have in a business setting.

The emotional impact

Where does this meaning-making happen? Let’s take a look at the brain.

The left side of your brain is your data center. It processes information in a linear fashion, focuses on language and logic, and is attentive to reasoning. But the left brain also tends to be more skeptical and loves numbers and facts. Because it’s emotionally neutral, it’s always seeking more information. Whenever people are engaged in ongoing debates about information, you know the left side of the brain is in full swing.

The right side of your brain is the fountain of creativity. This part processes information through the imagination. It’s where symbols, images, music, metaphors, dreams, and emotions are. It’s more focused on sensory material (what you can hear, feel, taste, smell, and see), tends to fill in information gaps, and is more accepting. Instead of seeking more information for debates, the right brain’s curiosity leads you to want resolution. And here’s a huge surprise: The right side of the brain is the path to the limbic (emotional) system and quickly becomes emotionally engaged if it is stimulated.



Why is this important? According to Michael Gazzaniga, author of *Who’s in Charge? Free Will and the Science of the Brain* (HarperCollins, 2011), the emotional brain is where feelings of trust, loyalty, and hope are activated and where unconscious emotional decisions are made. In his book *How Customers*

Think: Essential Insights into the Mind of the Market (Harvard Business Review Press, 2003), Gerald Zaltman says that 95 percent of the time our minds are on autopilot, which means that *most* of our decisions are made unconsciously.



Now consider this: Geoff Kaufman and Lisa Libby found that stories are perceived as *truer* than facts because we identify with and internalize the characters (www.tiltfactor.org/wp-content/uploads2/Kaufman_Libby2012_JPSPadvanceonlinepublication.pdf). When you can see yourself in the story, it becomes more real than facts.

Let's now put these pieces of the puzzle together. If it's true that the left brain is emotionally neutral, is always seeking more information, and tends to be more skeptical, why would you only want to *solely* speak to it? And, if it's true that stories are perceived as truer than facts because we identify with the characters, why would you want to rely on business speak to influence behavior? Especially if the right side of the brain, which is emotional in nature, is where decisions are unconsciously made before facts and data come into the picture? What makes storytelling different is that it's a *whole brain* and *whole body* experience.



Paul Zak, director of the Center for Neuroeconomics Studies and Professor of Economics, Psychology and Management at Claremont Graduate University, conducted a series of research studies that focus on a story a dad tells about his two-and-a-half year old son, Ben, who's dying of brain cancer (www.youtube.com/watch?v=q1a7tiA1Qzo&sns=tw). The dad expresses that it's hard to play with Ben knowing he's dying, especially because Ben is so happy. Zak demonstrates that two primary emotions — distress and empathy — were elicited in those who heard the story. He found that cortisol is released in the listener when the main character of a story is distressed (due to a problem, challenge, struggle, and so on). Cortisol helps you focus your attention on something of importance. Oxytocin is also released, which prompts feelings of care, connection, and empathy.

Zak concluded that for a story to cause these physical changes, it must have dramatic arc structure — capturing tension with a problem or struggle and a climax. When a story does this, it changes a listener's brain chemistry.



What's the bottom line? When you're impacted emotionally by listening to a compelling story, two things are occurring simultaneously: You're both *imagining* what's happening and *analyzing* the story for content, information, and key messages. As a result, you're more prone to remember, recall, and internalize the story and take action on it.

The human spirit impact

In the field of story work, almost everyone says evoking emotions is good enough. We don't. We believe that for a story to truly compel people to action — the ultimate goal of any story in business — it must touch the human spirit. Every day you're bombarded by messages via TV, podcasts, articles, blog postings, billboards, and other media that try to tug on your heartstrings — to the point where you may have become somewhat immune to emotional appeal. That means any messages you and your company send out have to stand out above all this noise in order to be heard and acted on.

Reflect back on stories you've heard over your lifetime. Have any given you goose bumps? Or made the hair stand up on your arms or neck? Such a story strikes you to your core. There's a special quality about it that makes it unforgettable. You feel compelled to share it and can't stop thinking about it. You might even say to yourself, "I need to do something. Like, right now." Can business stories do this? Absolutely. Can you tell these types of unforgettable stories? Yep. That's why we wrote this book.



Touching the human spirit also includes stories that are the ultimate embodiment of good. They transcend our personal view of the world and offer an expanded way of being and living that supports our own aliveness and the aliveness of others. Mrs. Meyer's Clean Day, owned by Caldrea, is one company that plays in this realm. In describing "Who We Are," Caldrea says, "Each day, we look for ways to inspire everyone on the planet to breathe in, smile, and live beautifully. This philosophy is the glue that connects what we do every day to the larger impact we want to make on the world and the little ways we want to help you love your home and your life in it. We're committed to using earth-friendly practices and have instituted programs at our office to protect and care for the environment, and our employees (www.caldrea.com/who-we-are).

At Mrs. Meyer's Clean Day, this embodiment of good philosophy is depicted through a film series: short video anecdotes (these don't contain all the elements of a story as explained in Chapter 3). These videos are stated to be "A celebration of individuals whose generosity, hard work and connection with nature inspire us every day." You can check them out at www.mrsmeyers.com/film-series.

Dispelling the Myths of Storytelling

Used judiciously and properly, stories can make a marked difference for all types of organizations. However, you may need to overcome some of the following myths about storytelling. We raise them here and address them throughout the book in more detail:

- ✔ **Stop wasting my time — this is taking too long.** Stories are how people convey meaning. It's true that no one has time today to listen to information that isn't meaningful. That means no one has time for bad storytelling. Stories are one of the quickest ways to make a point. Stories engage and inspire action. Sharing a story first allows people to make decisions and take action much more quickly later on. Just because a story may need eight minutes to be told in exactly the way it needs to be shared, don't let that deter you from using it. People will spend the time to listen to well-constructed compelling stories, which means structuring them well is your issue.
- ✔ **Stories are false and are make-believe.** Authentic and genuine storytelling is one of the best ways to share who you are and what your organization is all about. Real-life stories, when chosen, told, and crafted well, transmit cultural values, make the complex simple to understand, and convey both knowledge and wisdom. In addition, storytelling and story listening build empathy. Empathy allows you to experience the product or service from the mind of the user and understand their true needs. Empathy makes us human; there's nothing false about that. We all want to connect, inspire, and influence on purpose. These are crucial roles that stories can fulfill.
- ✔ **Just give us the facts.** You may wonder, "Wouldn't it just be easier to skip stories altogether and simply deliver the facts?" Nope — it may be simpler, but it's not easier. Remember our discussion of left and right brains? If you don't engage their right brain through story, people shut down when faced with too many facts and data. You'll have to remind them later of the information. You'll have to follow up with them to make sure they understood its significance. You'll need to continually link the data to daily work, and so on. Ugh, what a boatload of work.
- ✔ **Numbers are simply abstractions.** And, bullet points are merely summaries. Both only *reflect* reality. A story, however, *becomes* reality because people immediately engage with and internalize it. Remember, no one ever waged a filibuster or staged a takeover because of charts, graphs, or bullet points.
- ✔ **I shouldn't — or don't know how to — talk about myself.** People want the human face behind the enterprise. Customers want human relationships, not a faceless organization. People want to hear your personal stories, delivered humbly, authentically, and with respect. No one can argue with the truth of your experience. It's simply a matter of learning how to select, craft, and tell your personal stories. Storytelling and story listening skills can be learned. Armed with knowledge about what works and what doesn't through this book, your abilities to influence and move people will become easier and more natural.