

7 ways to engage your clients with storytelling

By Yamini Naidu

Two young goldfish were swimming along when they met an older fish, who said, 'Morning, boys. How's the water?' One of the young goldfish looked over at the other and said, 'What the hell is water?' The late novelist David Foster Wallace, shared this story to the 2005 graduating class of Kenyon College, Ohio. It illustrates how the most obvious, important realities are often those that are hardest to see. Wallace made an effective and memorable point through a simple

but powerful story. There is an important lesson here for finance professionals who want to build loyal relationships with their clients.

Storytelling is a tool for influence. It creates connections between you and your clients and inspires them to action. We don't use stories enough in business. Because we are unsure how to do this well. So here are seven insights that will help you engage your clients with storytelling.

What's the point?

Business storytelling is defined as storytelling with a purpose and for results. Effective professionals are always clear on the purpose, the message of the story. That is because humans are hard wired to tell stories. We tell stories naturally. But the key difference between storytelling in our personal lives and in business, is the point you are making. To have impact in business, you have to be crystal clear about the message of your story. (It could be even





as short as the goldfish story). Otherwise it's like aiming an arrow with no target: you are bound to fall short of the mark.

Make data the hero

In business data is the hero and story the supporting act. Yes, you need to have the case study, the cost benefit analysis, and the return on investment figures. But most finance professionals stop with the data. Data on its own is not enough to persuade your clients. Research tells us people buy based on emotion and justify their decision with the logic. In addition to providing the data you have to have compelling stories. Data appeals to the head and stories appeal to the heart.

'Stories are data with soul' says Brené Brown, American author and research professor at the University of Houston. Soulless data has few buyers.

Know your audience

At a recent networking event I was introduced to an entrepreneur. When asked who his target market was, he replied 'Anyone with a pulse!'. Not identifying your audience is a guarantee of failing in storytelling. A story has to be right for your audience. For example contrast what would appeal to a young family buying their first home, versus a recently retired baby boomer. Darren Rowse, the founder of one of the world's most successful

blogging sites, problogger.net, has a razor-sharp understanding of his audience. He'll paint this picture: a thirty-something who lives in the inner-city suburb of Northcote, loves coffee and rides a fix-wheeled bicycle. He then writes with that person alone in mind.. Being clear on your audience transforms your impact with clients.

Short and sharp

One hundred years ago, our attention span was 20 minutes. Today we're down to just nine seconds, author Sally Hogshead points out in her book Fascinate. We've become lean, mean scanning machines. This habit is hardening as a survival tactic in a digital age

that swamps us with information. So for your story to work it has to be succinct, anywhere between 30 seconds, and up to 2 minutes. To craft a punchy story my clients write up their stories down. The discipline of spending some time on story crafting is critical. A long-winded story will turn off any audience and fast.

Authenticity is non negotiable

'In marketing spin you take one truth and spin everything around' declared a marketing expert in a recent Gruen Transfer episode (an Australian show that lifts the lid on advertising). Business storytelling is the complete opposite of that. Everything about your story needs to be authentic. Stories are not spin. 'Stories need to be both factually true as well as authentically true', states Steve Denning, the father of business storytelling. Denning shares this example, 'On the Titanic's maiden voyage 700 people arrived in New York. This is factually true but it leaves out the detail that the ship sank and 1500 people died'. Authenticity in storytelling is vital.

Everyday, not epic

Motivational speakers often inform our preconceptions about storytelling. They narrate epic stories that involve scaling Mount Everest or sailing around the world solo. But in business what works is not epic stories but everyday stories. Stories about shopping in Bunnings, or going to a restaurant with friends. Everyday stories work because your clients relate to them. They see themselves in your stories.



An epic story has your audience in passive spectator mode. They enjoy the spectacle of your story, but they are not involved in it. An everyday story engages your audience in a different way. Your audience emotionally invests in your story and relive their own experiences through your story. A key to engaging with your clients is sharing everyday stories that they can relate to.

Practice and then practice some more

In the work I do with business professionals on storytelling, I am often asked about 'natural' storytellers. The truth is natural storytellers practice and everyone can get better at storytelling with preparation and practice. Way back in the first century, Seneca, a Roman philosopher nailed it when he said 'Luck is where preparation meets opportunity'. This is just as true with storytelling. Write your stories down so they have a purpose, and are short and tailored to your audience and then practice them aloud. Practice is the difference between amateurs and pros.

Every day we have an opportunity to engage our clients - or not, have our advice acted on - or not, have our ideas implemented - or not. The right story is the difference between failure and success. Discovering business storytelling is like life after Google - you wonder how you ever lived without it.



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