

Tell Me a Story: Putting the Oldest Form of Communication to Work For You

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Storytelling is the oldest medium for creating connections between people. Even if you don't think of yourself as a storyteller, I believe that listening to the stories your clients tell is one of the best practices you can follow.

So, why stories? Several reasons.

The first is simply this: Stories win. A good story beats piles of data and pages of PowerPoint every time. This isn't saying you don't need data, rather that with data absent, a story loses every time. And I've been in plenty of meetings where I've seen a senior executive shoot down the most exquisitely detailed presentation with a single anecdote from his or her own experience.

Second, stories serve as powerful containers for important information about context, frames (what's in and out), values, and choices. They tell us in direct and indirect ways nearly everything we need to know about how a person thinks or how an organization works.

Third, stories are 'space-makers': They make room for people to enter into a state of boundarylessness with each other. Inside the comfortable confines of a story, you stop being you, I stop being me, and we become caught up in the arc and the detail of the story. In those moments, we find a new ground on which we can relate to each other.

Finally, and I think most powerfully, when I am able to hear me in your story, and conversely when you are able to hear you in my story, the space extends and the boundaries that separate us become less formidable, less permanent. We're not so different after all. We're not so strange. Perhaps, we can travel together after all.

People do things for their own reasons, not yours.

The stories we should care most about are the ones the people we're trying to influence tell.

You would think that the best way to learn about your client's reasons is to just ask them. But it doesn't always work that way. Some people lie. Some simply dissemble. Some don't even know what it is they want. Maybe some do. But only a fool believes that you're going to get the whole truth and nothing by the truth by storming the castle from the front.

You know where this is going. The other obvious path to the treasure room is to listen to the stories your clients tell. And all clients tell stories. So what in particular are we listening for? Let's start with three themes.

Frames: How do people see the problem?

These are stories that give you insight to how the client sees the world: How he or she sees both the problems and opportunities. For example, I can remember making a long presentation to a senior executive about sales rep coverage ratios and then having him detonate my presentation by telling a story about a conversation he had with another senior executive. It went something like this . . .

"I called the CIO of company X the other day. I knew we were going to have this conversation so I asked him how many times a year he wanted to talk to a salesperson from our company. He said he thought once or twice a year was more than enough. So I just don't see why our salespeople can't handle at least 25 or 30 strategic accounts."

Oh.

Values: What's important?

Another kind of story we want to listen for relates to "values": What the company, or more accurately the leaders of the company, think is important. For example, you might be aware that your client company is keen on cutting

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“Tell me and I forget. Teach me and I may remember. Involve me and I learn.” — Benjamin Franklin

costs. That's good to know. But a story gives that kind of information a kind of vividness that you wouldn't get otherwise.

For example, I remember years ago being told a story about a senior executive named Carl. Normally, when Carl returned from lunch, he went straight to the top floor where his office was, but on this day, he decided to get off on a different floor to have a look around. There on the floor in the hallway was a stack of Wall Street Journals that had yet to be picked up. This either meant that twenty people called in sick that day, or that Carl had paid for twenty Wall Street Journal subscriptions that were not being read.

There was a long list of things Carl didn't like, and wasting shareholder money was at the very top. So, he went back to his office and drafted a memo to the effect that all Wall Street Journal subscriptions were to be canceled immediately. And they were. What's important here is that I heard this story five years after the event happened.

Choices: What's In and What's Out

The third kind of information we're interested in finding relates to the choices people perceive they have. Sometimes these stories show up very late in the game. Other times you hear them in the form of justification for why people are doing what they're doing.

For example, I can remember talking with a senior executive about the subject of sales training. This guy had come up the ranks through business development and had been a very successful sales person. Somewhere in the middle of the meeting, he said something like, "I didn't have any of that kind of training or support when I was coming up through the ranks and I was pretty successful. I don't see why these people need it either."

My response, which was probably ill considered, was, 'And there is only one you. That's why you have this job and they all have those jobs.' Jaws dropped and everyone in the room looked busily at whatever was in front of them. After what seemed like about ten years, my client laughed and said something under his breath . . . and we made the sale.

Listen and Learn:

Notice that the examples I'm using aren't epic tales. They're more like snippets. But in all cases, these "narratives around the edges" provide the details and texture we need to understand our clients and to find anchor points for our ideas and recommendations.

Let's put these ideas into practice.

My first recommendation to you is to pay attention to the stories that your clients tell. You probably already know what the stories are, but it might be a good idea for you to make some notes about them and about the information those stories communicate about the three things I just mentioned: values, problem definitions, and choices.

My second recommendation is to literally ask your clients to tell you their stories. You might even use those words. If for some reason the word "story" makes you nervous, you can say things like, "Can you give me an example of that?" Or, "Is there something in particular you're thinking about?" The next thing you will hear will be a story.

My third recommendation is that you retell those stories inside your company so that your colleagues can absorb some of the texture and context they just don't get from reading reports, ignoring your emails, or surfing randomly through your CRM system.