

The Power of Story



It's a warm summer night in June, and I am standing under a tent before 100 or so strangers with just a microphone in front of me and a bare stage behind, telling them a story.

It's the story of how two days after giving birth, I am horrified to learn that my daughter, Lily, has a serious congenital heart defect. I take them along on my desperate search to find a skilled surgeon to conduct the operation she must undergo to save her life. On the day of her surgery, I tell them, Lily is five months old, weighs just 10 pounds, and her heart is roughly the size of a walnut. "How," I wonder aloud, "can they even operate on a heart that small?"

As I tell the 10-minute story, the room falls silent. Everyone in the audience is reliving my journey with me, step by painful step. It's the kind of rapt attention every public speaker craves.

And it's a testament to the power of story.

Anyone who communicates for a living (or reads to children at bedtime) knows that a compelling story, well told, grabs hearts and minds. And there are as many ways to tell a story as there are stories to tell. Something especially powerful can happen, however, if a well-crafted true story is told live, without notes.



This kind of personal narrative storytelling, in case you hadn't noticed, is having quite a moment these days. The Moth, a 20-year-old nonprofit formed to showcase live, true stories, is producing storytelling shows in dozens of states and a few countries, selling out large venues like Lincoln Center in New York City and the Sydney Opera House in Australia. And in smaller stages around the country and around the world, live storytelling shows are popping up and drawing huge crowds.

Storytelling is also being leveraged as a tool for corporate training in many areas, including leadership, branding, messaging and fundraising. Storytelling organizations like The Moth, science-story based Story Collider and Story Studio have developed thriving corporate programs to teach storytelling. Increasingly, Fortune 500 companies, nonprofits and foundations are hiring experienced storytellers to coach executives on how to craft their own compelling stories about the work they do and produce themed storytelling events featuring the organization's executives and staff.

"There are a thousand coaches and workshops who come in and tell you why telling stories is a great way to persuade people or communicate in business, but none tell you how to tell a good story," Evan Wolf, a global sales executive at Google told Crain's New York business in an article earlier this year on the business of storytelling. "That's why you need a storyteller to do that."

Scientists are also starting to put storytelling under a microscope to unpack exactly what stories are doing to us.

Neuroscientist Paul Zak, Ph.D., author of "The Moral Molecule: The Source of Love and Prosperity," discovered through his research that well-told stories release oxytocin, the neurochemical that tells the brain it's safe to trust someone. Oxytocin is often called the "love hormone" because of its role in forging human connections, and creating empathy.

STORYPOINT

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In a 2014 Harvard Business Review article about his work, Zak noted that when stories follow a certain pattern—developing and sustaining tension throughout so that people become invested in the outcome—a strong emotional connection forms between the audience and storyteller. And that bond is so strong that listeners literally start feeling the emotions of the storyteller and the “feel good” oxytocin hormone is released. Once it’s released, Zak says, it’s more likely that the listeners will trust the storytellers and take whatever action the storytellers asks them to take.

It’s no wonder, then, that organizations are lining up to learn how to tell effective stories in an effort to influence and persuade.

So what are the essential elements of an effective live story?

Make sure it’s *your* story. This trips up many storytellers—the story must be about the person telling it. You can only guess at what is going on in the hearts and minds of other people. But if you reach inside yourself and take people on a journey through a meaningful experience from your own life with candor and vulnerability, the audience will invariably follow.

Just as important, a story needs tension and stakes—the higher the better. You must have something you stand to gain or lose before you start your journey. In the animated classic “Toy Story,” for instance, Woody’s position as Andy’s favorite toy is threatened by the appearance of shiny new toy, Buzz Lightyear. In the story about my daughter, I am racing against time and my own ignorance to find the right surgeon to save my baby’s life.

Be authentic and be vulnerable.

This is absolutely crucial in live storytelling. We all have a built-in bullshit detector and we will tune out storytellers if they seem phony, overly rehearsed or if everything in the story adds up too neatly. This is also why most storytelling shows insist that the storytellers perform without notes and that stories aren’t memorized by rote.

As a storyteller I can tell you that getting up on a bare stage with just my story inside me can often feel like walking on a tightrope without a net. But this frisson, this constant eye contact and understanding between me and the audience that anything can happen, is exactly why live storytelling is so compelling.

Don't try to look good. Audiences also tend to reject stories where the teller is the hero. Paradoxically, it's our failures, not our successes, that humanize us and make people root for us to emerge from them a different person. So if an organization wants to highlight, for example, the impact its programs are having on literacy in a particular community, it would be ideal if they could find someone in the organization who could talk about an initial setback, a moment where they failed or thought they were going to fail and how that affected them and the project. The story of those failures and the way they were overcome is more powerful than any statistics on how many people in the community can now read and write.

Tell us how your story changed you. Ultimately, stories must take the audience on a journey of transformation. If they don't, they're just anecdotes that are best left on a bar stool. It's the "aha" moment in the narrative that is especially key to live storytelling. You were one person when the story begins, but something happens that changes you. That's what makes audiences care.

It's this shift in focus from exposition to story that can make all the difference. If you're having trouble finding the heart of your story, acclaimed storyteller Peter Aguero offers this guidance from a 2015 article on "How to Tell a Story the Right Way." "The example I always use," Aguero says, "is if the story is about a house fire, it's not that the house caught on fire that's the interesting part. It's what did you choose to grab first. That lets us know something about you."

When you blend all of these elements in the right way, the resulting stories can and do create deep, meaningful connections between you and the people you're trying to reach. After I told my daughter's harrowing story of making it through the surgery only to have to face new complications in the intensive care unit before ultimately recovering enough to go home (she's now a happy, healthy 17-year-old), a woman shyly approached me. She was a physician who had worked in the same cardiac unit where Lily's surgery was performed. "Thank you," she said. "You helped me understand in a way I never had before what new parents go through when their babies are sick. Stories like yours can make us all better caregivers."

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