

Storytelling companies find that talk doesn't have to be cheap

Established brands like The Moth are squaring off with newcomers to the spoken word industry

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BUZZ WORDS: George Dawes Green, founder of The Moth, performing at the Players Club

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Adam Wade has never been so busy. The veteran storyteller started offering workshops to teach his craft nearly a decade ago. But recently his six-week-long course—which costs \$375 for up to 14 students—has been selling out immediately. At the same time, interest in his monthly storytelling series, *The Adam Wade From New Hampshire Show*, has been so great that Wade moved it to the Kraine Theater in the East Village, where he sells its 120 seats for \$10 each. And there are so many other storytelling venues popping up around New York City that Wade now performs two to three times a week, mostly in Manhattan.

“Storytelling has gotten big,” he said. “With all the technology in the world today, people are looking for some type of real

connection with other human beings, and storytelling gives them that.”

Storytelling, one of the oldest types of art, is having a rebirth. But instead of family elders sharing folklore around a fire, a growing number of savvy professionals are creating substantial businesses out of spinning true tales from their own life and sharing their poignant or embarrassing secrets. They are producing shows, going on tour, creating podcasts, publishing books and running corporate workshops. Audiences are coming out in droves.

And the confessional art form is growing fast in New York City, as evidenced by a Facebook page listing all the storytelling events taking place here.

Show organizers are working with themes or adding gimmicks to make their performances stand out. For example, Erin Barker produces a podcast and national show, called *The Story Collider*, that features stories about science. Angela Cobb’s storytelling show, *My First Time*, includes funny stories about losing one’s virginity. That show runs at the Q.E.D. in Astoria, Queens.

“You can now go to a storytelling show almost every night in the city,” said Tracey Segarra, a fledgling storyteller who caught the open mike bug in the city and brought the trend to Long Island. “There is a need for this, and a market.”

About a year ago Segarra, a marketing executive by day, got up the courage to share a tough personal story—about a miscarriage—with a crowd of strangers at a Moth StorySlam in Manhattan. She ended up winning the distinction of best story of the night. Immediately hooked, she went on to perform at other Moth events—including the GrandSlam, which is held in front of 400 people at the Music Hall of Williamsburg.



Segarra, director of marketing for accounting firm Margolin, Winer & Evens, has introduced storytelling to the relatively sleepy New York suburb where she lives. A few months ago she started her own show, *Now You're Talking*, for which she invites artists to open their heart in a Rockville Centre bookstore. The event at the 50-person space has been filled to capacity, so in May she plans to move it to a 180-seat theater in Merrick, where she will charge \$20 a ticket.

“When someone is telling a good personal story, it’s complete and utter silence,” Segarra said. “It’s like, We’re all in this together.”

The growing popularity of podcasts and TED Talks has brought new appreciation for the spoken word. And the chance to peek into people’s lives through social media has heightened interest in the stories of others. But artists say storytelling offers something more: the intimacy and connection of listening to someone share the most meaningful events of their life, often in person.

An untapped market

The storytelling trend started with The Moth, a New York–based nonprofit founded in 1997 by novelist George Dawes Green, who’d held storytelling nights in his apartment. The organization built a following but really gained attention in 2008, when it launched a podcast. The podcast became number one on iTunes and was followed by a radio program that is now broadcast on 450 stations nationwide.

In the past three years, The Moth’s annual budget has doubled, to \$6 million. More than 35 million people download its podcasts each year. And its live shows consistently sell out across the country, with tickets averaging \$35. The Moth’s 900-seat shows at Cooper Union sell out before the storytellers for the evening are even announced. The organization’s first book, containing its 50 favorite stories, became a best-seller, and its next book is due out in March.

“We cannot keep up with the interest,” said Kate Tellers, senior producer, corporate programs, for the nonprofit.

The demand has anointed new storytelling kingpins. Kevin Allison, who is widely considered to run the next-biggest storytelling operation after The Moth, became a storyteller in 2009. A comedy writer/performer with the

MTV show *The State* in the 1990s, Allison was introduced to storytelling at a Moth event. Soon after he created Risk!, a venue for people to share their private stories.



Buck Ennis

WISE WORDS: Kevin Allison teaches the craft confession.

Allison started with a New York show and now produces events around the country in which 300 to 400 people watch five storytellers talk for about 15 minutes each. The storytellers range from such celebrities as Sarah Silverman and Janeane Garofalo to novices who pitch demo tapes. At \$15 to \$30, ticket prices are relatively low for an evening of entertainment. Allison also produces a podcast that now averages more than 2 million downloads per month, up from 100,000 downloads a month in 2011, when it began. A book and a potential television special are in the works.

“When we started Risk!, people said, ‘You can’t make any money telling stories,’” Allison said. “But you just need to be creative and figure out how to have various streams of revenue with it.”

One of those streams comes from corporate training. Companies that used to rely on consultants to run sales and team-building workshops are turning to storytellers to make them more authentic and effective.

“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,” said Evan Wolf, a global sales executive at Google. “That’s why you need a storyteller to do that.”

He hired Allison to run an off-site event for his team last spring.

Wolf said companies are turning away from corporate-feeling retreats and training courses. “Kevin doesn’t use PowerPoint, slides and worksheets,” Wolf said. “It’s just people sitting around in a semicircle, sharing stories and learning how to get better at it.”

Allison said one-third of his revenue comes from giving corporate workshops and storytelling classes. In 2011 he started The Story Studio, which offers \$150 two-day workshops in person and online. But Allison’s fees can go up to \$10,000 for a long-distance engagement at a corporation.



The Moth also started a corporate-training program, run by Tellers. She leads the workshops and travels nearly every week to the likes of Google, Facebook and major pharmaceutical companies.

An up-and-coming competitor in the space is Robin Gelfenbien, a storyteller who recently began offering workshops for individuals and businesses, including Meredith Corporation and PricewaterhouseCoopers.

Five years ago Gelfenbien, a comedian with a passion for baking, started the monthly *Yum's the Word* storytelling event at Le Poisson Rouge on Bleecker Street. Each show in the series features four storytellers and gourmet ice-cream cakes, the flavors of which the audience votes on. The themes are ice-cream-inspired—for example, “Rocky Road (Stories of Danger),” “Mister Softee (Awkward Sex Stories)” and “Half Pints (Childhood Stories).”

Recent shows have been headlined by Jason Biggs and Joy Behar. Admission is \$20, and each show usually attracts about 130 people.

To boost revenue, Gelfenbien is in talks with ice-cream vendors about sponsorship opportunities, and she's working on a national tour. “Storytelling is so relevant in business,” she said. “It makes you more human. People don't want to be sold to. They want to be engaged with.”

Correction: Kevin Allison produces a podcast for Risk! that gets an average of 2 million downloads per month. This figure was misstated in an earlier version of this article, originally published Jan. 23, 2017.

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