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Trainers can tell the darnedest stories

By Lynn Welch

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It's much easier to remember a story than a series of bullet points.

In fact, storytelling is one of the most effective communication tools, according to Madison business consultant and author Lori Silverman. She calls it the "best kept secret in business."

"A story touches the physical, the emotional, the mental and the human spirit. And when we touch the spirit, we can inspire people," Silverman said. "It allows us to think differently, take on a new attitude, try new behavior and move forward."

Silverman and Milwaukee consultant Mary Wacker this year released a book that aims to take the yawn out of training sessions, business meetings and other professional gatherings. "Stories Trainers Tell — 55 Ready-to-use Stories to Make Training Stick" provides scripted stories to help get a point across more effectively. She spoke this week about storytelling in business before The Business Forum.

"What we are trying to do is increase retention of information," Silverman explained in an interview. "People have so little time and they're so distracted by



Silverman

so many things, we need a mechanism to activate their attention and get them to remember information longer."

This is Silverman's second book. She was the lead author with Annabeth Propst of "Critical SHIFT: The Future of Quality in Organizational Performance," published in 1999.

"Stories Trainers Tell" was he brainchild of Madison consultant Laura Page. The book contains stories compiled and organized by Silverman and Wacker from 35 storytellers from industry leaders, trainers, consultants and professional speakers. Madisonians Page, Joan Gillman and Bob Shaver all contributed stories for the book.

Stories are indexed by message-related sections, among them appreciating difference, influence and motivation, customer service, leadership and problem solving.

Although the book was written for professional trainers with a nod from

the American Society of Training and Development, Silverman said storytelling is for everyone.

"My goal is to bring the whole storytelling practice into the workplace. It's much broader than the book," Silverman said.

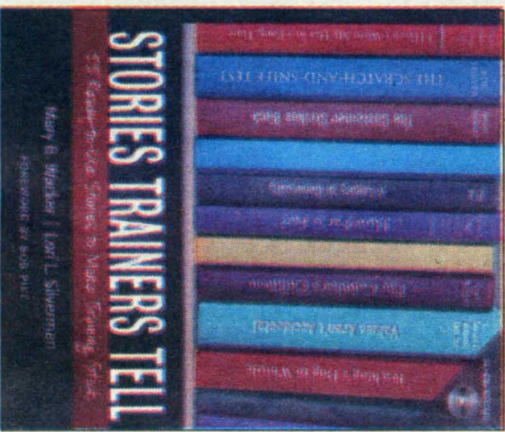
Through the book and a Web site, www.sayitwithastory.com, Silverman wants to spread storytelling as an effective communications tool beyond training. She said stories work well in one-on-one situations, department meetings, project presentations, coaching and mentoring, performance evaluations and feedback sessions.

Where is storytelling not effective? In a situation where time is of the essence, or there's a heated argument, Silverman explained.

But in many situations, it is effective. What's more, Silverman said storytelling is a skill that can be learned by anyone wanting to use it.

For a story to work, it needs several components: an obstacle, problem or issue to overcome; a point, positively stated in no more than seven to nine words; and, finally, a listener involvement factor that gets people to start thinking about the point.

It's not all intuitive, Silverman insists, but rather a technical skill that



can be learned through practice.

The "Stories Trainers Tell" book gives a start to those who want to use storytelling in communications. The Web site, essentially a library of stories for subscribers, does the same.

Silverman owns Partners for Progress and is an adjunct faculty member at the University of Wisconsin-Madison's Pluno Center for Executive Education and School of Continuing Education as well as at UW-Milwaukee.