

CW

Books



CW
BULLETIN

What Makes a Story A Story?

by **Lori L. Silverman**

When I present workshops on using stories within an organization, I ask participants to reflect on the best movie they've ever seen, or the best novel they've ever read and to identify their commonalities. I often hear:

- There are characters. You learn what they're thinking and feeling.
- There's a main plot, with some sort of suspense, and conflict that gets played out.
- There's an ending, often with a lesson or moral.
- You're transported into the story—it's as though it's happening right in front of you.

Yet, when I review internal publications, company or product endorsements, case studies demonstrating customer successes and other print and online communications that purport to convey stories, I find they're often missing these characteristics. They tend to be descriptive of situations instead of relaying actual stories about what occurred. So, what is a story, what is its basic structure and what considerations go into crafting it?

What is a story?

[Discuss this article](#)

Related Resources:

- **[It's Time for Storytelling:](#)**
Corporate storytelling motivates employees to help reach the organization's business goals.
- **[The Power of Stories:](#)**
Stories can have a powerful impact on business customers, stakeholders and employees.
- **[Evaluate Your Own Story:](#)**
Evelyn Clark, an expert in corporate storytelling, provides a checklist for you to measure how communication is working to build your corporation's story.

According to Karen Dietz, former executive director of the National Storytelling Network, "A story is an act of communication that provides people with packets of sensory material that allow the listener to quickly and easily internalize the material, understand it, and create meaning from it." David Hutchens, author of several books including *Outlearning the Wolves*, defines a story as "a narrative that illustrates complex interconnections between agents, ideas, events and even abstract concepts." Taken together, these definitions mean that sound bites and situational highlights don't qualify as stories. Neither do examples of what to do and not do, or personal anecdotes that are devoid of contextual information, characters and a plot.

The structure of a story

In their purest form, stories have a beginning, middle and an end—what's called a story arc. To capture people's attention, present the context of the situation. This may include the location, time of year, hour of the day, weather and geography, as well as the history of the situation. It introduces the main character and the supporting cast, if applicable. The middle of the story fleshes out a conflict—an obstacle, challenge, issue or dilemma—and builds to a climax. For various reasons, organizations often minimize or hide this conflict. I suggest doing just the opposite. State it. Give it shape and form. The contrast between the conflict and its resolution is what gives a story its impact.

Finally, bring the story to closure. Describe how the conflict is resolved and move people who hear or read it to give it meaning. Two tactics help accomplish this: answering the question, "What's the point of the story?" and stating the story's "call to action."

Take time to uncover the story's key point even though listeners or readers will create their own meaning from it. Ideally, this moral or lesson

Using stories

In 1991, while a docent at The University of Texas at San Antonio's Institute of Texan Cultures, Mary Grace Ketner was hired as a scriptwriter to write anecdotal stories about diverse ethnic and cultural groups that colonized Texas—their humor, pathos, and commonalities across time and location. For many years she crafted five, 90-second radio shows per week as part of the *LIFETIMES* program that was scheduled to air at specific times on stations across Texas.

While each short story followed the story arc structure, they didn't contain a key point or call to action. This is because the organization's reasons for using them weren't based on their individual usage but on two overriding purposes: to increase its name recognition and to establish itself as an authority on Texan cultures. To help accomplish this, before and after every story the organization's full name was repeated. And collectively, the stories were consciously crafted to reaffirm the museum's commitment to and expertise in Texan cultures.

will resonate with the story's intended audience. Phrase this point in a positive manner, in seven words or less, so that it is memorable and causes the listener or reader to recall the entire story. Stating it positively allows people to know what's expected or needed from them—or the action you'd like them to take afterward. Once you're clear on the key point (this could take several weeks to determine), rework the entire story to support it.

Reinforce the key point through a call to action at the end of the story.

Craft it specifically for its intended audience. For example, if the key point is, "consider the consequences," its associated call to action might be,

"How often when making a decision have you overlooked its consequences because you're too busy, only to have unintended negative consequences stare you in the face later on? How costly has this been for you—and for your organization? To minimize these risks in the future remember to consider the consequences of your decisions before announcing them." While the key point of a story is timeless and universal, the call to action is usually modified to fit the intended audience.

Tips for crafting stories

Given this structure, what do you need to consider when creating a story?

Here are eight tips.

- Craft stories using the spoken word. Often it's easier to record a story on audiotape than to develop it first in writing.
- Characters talk. Provide actual dialogue as well as what they're thinking.
- Use words that appeal to all five senses, especially those that create pictures in people's minds and evoke various emotions.
- There are many versions of stories, even those that are considered factual or historical. Be sure to state which version you are telling and mention your source. For example, is it according to The New York Times? A particular book? From several books or media sources?
- While you'll always want to stay true to the essence of a real story, using special words or humor to exaggerate a character's behaviors or the conflict, for example, may make it more memorable—as long as you stay within ethical guidelines.
- Create composite stories from a variety of situations. This is especially useful when relaying market information about a specific customer segment.

- It is acceptable to fabricate stories that might happen in the future, such as those that expand on an organizational or initiative-driven vision or that present a scenario that might happen many years from now.
- Obtain written permission if the story is not your own. Have its creator approve the final version before using it.

Stories have the ability to change people's behaviors, shift their attitudes and alter their feelings. To get the business results you want and need, take the time to craft them carefully.

© Copyright 2006 Lori L. Silverman

Lori L. Silverman is a business strategist, keynote speaker, author and the owner of Partners for Progress, a management consulting firm. She is the editor of Wake Me Up When the Data Is Over: How Organizations Use Stories to Drive Performance and the co-author of Stories Trainers Tell. You can reach her at lori@partnersforprogress.com.