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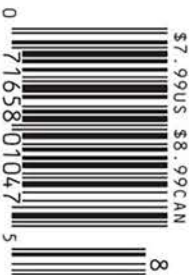
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THE TALE OF THE TAPE

A STORY-TELLING PRO EXPLAINS THE POWER OF STORIES, AND HOW TO TELL YOURS BETTER.

BY KINDRA HALL

We were in the minivan. I was 12 years old, traveling north with my family down rural Minnesota roads on the way to our small lake cabin for the weekend.

The scene in the van always looked the same. My father drove and listened to the Twins or Vikings game on the radio, my mother read her book and complained about having to read over the sound of the game. I too, read from my seat in the middle row. My younger brother sat in the back, listening to a Beach Boys cassette tape and my younger sister slept next to him. Every drive, for five hours, it was the same; each of us keeping quietly to ourselves.

But on this particular trip, our relative silence was broken by spontaneous bursts of laughter from my brother.

It was annoying at first, as noise emitting from little brothers tends to be. And then it was confusing; what was suddenly so funny about “Help Me Rhonda”?

The mystery was quickly solved when I realized he wasn’t listening to the Beach Boys but rather a tape my mother had checked out of the library—a storytelling tape.

On the cassette were 10 or so stories, told live by different storytellers at the National Storytelling Festival. As an older sister, it was my job to be disinterested in whatever my little brother was doing, but this simply couldn’t be ignored. His laughter was so genuine that we all wanted a piece of it. My mom made my brother remove the tape from his Walkman, my dad reluctantly turned off the game, and we played the tape from the beginning for the whole van to hear.

Though we varied in age, experiences and road-trip agendas, we were all equally captivated. We laughed until we cried for all of Side A and most of Side B until we arrived at the cabin. We were the most united I ever remember.

All it took were a few stories.

That was one of a handful of vivid memories from my childhood when I witnessed and experienced the grip a story can have on an individual, the glue it can become for a group.

Several years later, I entered and won a national storytelling competition. The grand prize was the opportunity to tell a story at the very festival where that road-trip cassette tape was recorded. So I traveled with my mother to the National Storytelling Festival in Jonesborough, Tennessee, where every October people from all over flood a no-stoptlight town and gather under enormous tents to hear stories from master tellers.



“The best leaders are great communicators who captivate people.”

The tellers aren't there to sell a product or promote an agenda, but rather to connect the people who squeeze into those tents by the thousands. I watched and listened as the tellers' stories mesmerized the crowd and had the distinct sense that the impact of storytelling went beyond what meets the eye.

When the festival concluded, my mother and I traveled back to the airport together. She looked at me and said, “You could do this, you know. You could be a professional storyteller.” I scoffed at her and rolled my eyes, as is teenage custom. “Oh yeah. I'm going to tell stories for the rest of my life. Sure.”

And though she now likely feels the urge to say, “I told you so” to me on a daily basis, I like to think we were both right because, yes, since that moment, stories have been my life; they are what I do, they are what I know, they are how I earn my income and how I make my difference.

However, the storytelling I do has very little to do with my stories and everything to do with helping you tell yours.

And that is why I am writing. As a reader of *SUCCESS*, you surely have goals similar to those storytellers who came into our minivan so many years ago, and you want to break down the barriers that stand between you and your goals. You want to compel your customers or colleagues to turn off whatever is distracting them and pay attention to you. You want to engage people in real, meaningful ways such that you'll be remembered long after the interaction is complete.

Just as my family came together in the van during that drive to the cabin, so do stories unite teams, connect customers to brands, and close the gaps that divide us.

If you are in business, it's likely you are suffering from a little known but alarmingly common plight that plagues entrepreneurs and companies across the globe. I call it TTT Syndrome. TTT stands for “Through the Trees.” You know how difficult it can be to see the whole forest (the big picture) when you're focused on each individual tree (the day to day of your business).

It is your job to be obsessed with the finite details of your work—to know every last metric, to eat, sleep and dream the features of your product or service and to never stop telling the world about it. However, as you become increasingly more entrenched in the details, it's easy to forget the bigger picture and, more importantly, to communicate what that bigger picture means for others.

But storytelling isn't only about making sales. It's a key to great leadership, too. The best leaders are great communicators who captivate people. The most captivating communications are stories. If you have your sights set on leading the masses—or even a small team—fast track those goals by telling better stories, more often.

FINDING YOUR STORY

So you may be asking how you can get started harnessing the power of stories in your business or career. The first point is to understand what a story really is. I'll give you three main points.

1. A STORY MUST HAVE IDENTIFIABLE CHARACTERS.

For your message to be a story, there must be a character your audience can identify with and care about. Most often it's a person—it could even be an animal—but it is definitely not a company or product.

2. A STORY MUST INCLUDE EMOTION.

A recitation of events will not make a compelling story. Include emotions to draw your audience in.

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KINDRA'S CREATIVE PROCESS



There's a meme about doing anything creative that I found several years ago. It goes in order from "this is amazing!" to...

"This is tricky.

This is crap.

I am crap.

This might be OK.

This is amazing!"

Anyone who works for themselves can likely relate. I sometimes cycle through this series of statements multiple times in a day. It's exhausting! And those middle few phases—the ones where you second guess yourself—are sometimes hard to snap out of. Though storytelling has obvious implications in business or relationships with other people, I believe the most important stories you can ever tell are the ones you tell yourself.

In those dark moments, do you have a story ready? A story of a time you made a difference in your customer's life? A story of a time someone believed in you? A story of a time a spouse, or child, or friend or family member stopped you and told you how great you are, how proud they are, or how much your work matters?

There are a million different places you can use stories to your advantage, but none of them matter if you don't have your own story straight.

—K.H.

3. A STORY MUST INCLUDE A MOMENT. Statements like, "We've always been committed to excellence," have their place in business. However, for your message to be an effective story, choose one moment when that excellence was exemplified.

There is more to consider, but that should be enough to get you started. So now you're ready to be a better storyteller. You know why stories work and what to avoid... now what?

To begin the process of story-fying your messages, think first about the message you're trying to deliver. Clarity of message is critical to the effective use of storytelling in business. It's the difference between the "Let's do this!" answer I received from a huge client after telling her a story about a time I produced results and the, "Why did you just waste my time?" brow furrow.

Once your message is clear, think back on your life and business experience and look for moments that show this message in action.

If it's a sales message, you may need to find a story about a time your product made a difference for someone. If it's a story for your team or to help establish yourself as a leader, look for moments in your life when you exemplified leadership qualities. Keep in mind, anything is fair game! Some of the best business stories I've heard weren't actually about business at all but rather stories from the teller's personal life.

Remember, people want to do business with people. The moments you choose will become stories that will connect you in ways flow charts and compensation plans can't.

It's like the story I told you at the beginning of this article. I don't know if you grew up in northern Minnesota or were the oldest of three kids or what sports teams your dad liked. I don't know if you've ever even been on a road trip. But I'm pretty sure you could imagine me there, in that van, as if you were there yourself. And in that moment, as you were listening to a story about the power of story... you were actually experiencing the power of story.

And it's my hope that the next time the stakes are highest, you break down the barriers and bridge the gaps because you chose to tell a story. ♦

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