

A Technique for Writing Your Business Story

Created by **David Sloly** to accompany his **EFX talk 20/11/2013**

We spend our waking hours observing the world we live in and as such constantly compiling our own internal narratives. These narratives help us make sense of the world we live in, form opinions, make decisions and justify our actions. We share those stories with our work colleagues, friends and partners.

Patrick Hogan, Professor of English and comparative literature at the University of Connecticut, has shown through research that stories have the ability to shape beliefs and change peoples' minds. Stories have such a powerful and universal appeal that the neurological roots of both telling them and enjoying them are probably tied to crucial parts of our social cognition and can alter our perception.

We live in a world of stories that we love to share and others love to hear, yet when it comes to the workplace we slide into a strange cold world of acronyms and logic: we open PowerPoint and present a long string of statements that must be true because they are projected in great big letters.

Benjamin Franklin famously said: "A man convinced against his will is of the same opinion still."

We may leave a presentation unable to argue against it, but we are not compelled to take action and buy it. A well-told story on the other hand, will move people emotionally to your point of view.

What is a business story?

A business story is any story that you tell relating to your business that helps a listener or reader better understand the thought you are trying to share. It can be 20 seconds long or it can be a book of 1000 pages. You can have multiple business stories for different audiences, or you can have one that helps the entire business focus. You can use them externally for marketing campaigns, pitches and talks. Equally you can deploy them internally in presentations and meetings. They are no different from any other story, except that they are about your business.

In the beginning

My story begins in November 1989, travelling in a camper van through Europe. During one very drunken evening near Athens I was persuaded to travel to Israel on a ship by a group of intoxicated Americans. All I had to do was head to the port in Athens the following day, buy a ticket and catch the boat. Dreams of hanging out in Bethlehem on Christmas day, floating in the dead sea and sneaking into the West Bank, played in my head. Except once I had purchased my non-refundable ticket with the last of my money, I got completely lost in Athens looking for the wretched ship.

Desperately lost, I stopped at the side of the road and stared out of the windscreen at a chaotic city and turned the radio on for distraction. I found myself completely absorbed by the story being told.

The presenter's set up to the story was clear: our hero set off on some kind of quest. The readers voice flipped between emotions as the hero met with conflict, until finally the climatic ending, and a huge sigh of relief as the readers voice delivered a calm resolution. It had highs and lows, conflict and resolution, all wrapped in an abundance of drama. I had experienced the classic three-act story: Act 1, Problem and Obstacle; Act 2, Conflict or Struggle and Act 3 Resolution, but of course I did not know that at the time. The truth is I could not even be sure that I was listening to a story at all, as I did not understand a single word of Greek.

The classic three-act story is so common that I was able to imagine a story unfolding without actually understanding the language and so began my desire to better understand the structure of stories and learn how they can be used as an efficient way to communicate.

On my return to the UK I enrolled with the BBC to train as a journalist and since then I have enjoyed a wonderful career covering all aspects of business communication. What follows are ten pointers from the stuff I learnt on my journey that will enable you to start telling your business stories in a more efficient way.

#1 Start with a Brief

A brief is derived from the Latin word “brevis”, meaning “short” and in marketing it is intended to perform two tasks: firstly it ensures that both the client and the agency agree on the job at hand and secondly it exists to help enlighten the creative team so that they can solve the client problem. A well-written brief will inspire the creative team and ideas will flow freely. The opposite produces the opposite. Now before I even consider writing a business story, I write a brief. So what do I put in the brief?

- **The first question I address is:** who are the target audience?
- **The second question is:** what did they think before hearing the business story?
- **The third question is:** what do I want them to think after they hear the story?

Only allow yourself to write one answer to each question. There is a saying that goes, ‘Throw me a ball and I will catch it, throw me three and I will drop them all.’ If you focus your answer on the one thought you would like to leave the audience with, they are much more likely to hear it and remember it.

- **The final question is:** what do you want them to do once they have heard the story?

The brief lays out what you must now deliver to create your business story. It contains information about the audience and the outcome you desire.

Now you have a brief that clearly outlines who you wish to speak to, what you are trying to communicate and what you want them to do once they have heard it. Now all we need are some words.

#2 Compose the Ending First

The natural instinct for any storyteller is to start at the beginning, but as a business person you know it makes sense that to achieve your goal you need to know what your goal is. So the same can be said for business storytelling. If you start your story at the beginning you have to fathom the path to the ending. If on the other hand, you already know how your business story will end, then navigating to it is much easier. So start by defining the ending and work back to the beginning from there. It’s easier to get somewhere if you already know what that somewhere looks like.

#3 What do People Really Want?

Newspaper editors are on the look out for stories with one or more of the four Ps. Any one of the four Ps will do, two is better, three is awesome and four Ps appearing in the story will save the newsprint industry for a day or two.

The four Ps that pique the interest of humans, which arouse in them a curiosity that must be addressed are as follows:

Princes

A prince is anyone (or thing) you can name, but you don't need to explain. For example, David Beckham does not need the word 'footballer' after his name, people know who he is. The same way that Coca Cola does not need to be described as a carbonated sugary drink, it is simply Coca Cola. Google is just Google, you do not need to explain that it is an online search engine.

Pets

We, the British, are obsessed with fluffy little animals. During a recent conversation with a vet, he informed me that one of his customers remortgaged her house to pay for the £15,000 surgery bill for her sick dog (it died one week later.) We love our pets more than our own neighbours and in some cases, our own flesh and blood.

Purses

Money, we are obsessed with it: complaining about it; dreaming of it; spending it; losing it and winning it. The more extreme the value we talk about, high or low, the more enticing our story is.

Places

We care about the places in life that are relevant to us: the place we live in, were born in, go on holiday to, or work in. So the saying goes: think global, but make it local.

We may prefer to believe that our customers are interested in benefits and features, but humans are inherently curious. So is there a Prince, a Pet, a Purse or a Place that you can include in your story?

#4 How to Create a Headline

An old newspaper hack once told me that there are only three types of headline. All professional newspapers, magazines and bloggers adhere to this practice. The three types of headline are...

1. The Promise Headline

The promise headline offers the reader a very clear promise.

Example: “Cure for Baldness Found”

2. The Intrigue Headline

The intrigue headline will draw you in, as you feel compelled to know more.

Example: “Man Bites Dog”

3. The News Headline

The news headline is news, defined as: new and interesting.

Example: “First Humans Land on Mars”

Question: What must a headline do? Answer: It must tell the story. Albeit briefly, but we must get the essence of what the story is about just from the headline. The test of a good headline goes like this... You are sitting by the window in your second floor office; a motorcycle pulls up at the traffic lights just outside your window. You have a few seconds before they change to green and you shout your headline out to the motorcyclist. Does the motorcyclist understand what your story will be about?

The headline is your title, the first thing people will read and if it does not offer them a suitable promise, intrigue or convey a sense of urgent news, they may just pass it by.

#5 Establish Your Point of View?

On the 14th October 2013, The Guardian newspaper ran a story by Journalist Hannah Furness about children’s books not being challenging enough and relying on “poo and bums” to get kids to read them. Best selling author Anne Fine, a former Children’s Laureate, Whitbread Prize and Carnegie Medal-winner, was interviewed for the story; her point of view was that parents should stop using base humour to encourage children to pick up a book and instead deliver the simple delights of storytelling. Anne has a point of view. Without a point of view Hannah Furness would have never included her in her article. Do not be afraid of putting the odd nose out of joint or rocking the boat a little, or a lot. No one is interested in wishy-washy middle of the roaders, so do not sit on the fence, be brave, establish your point and articulate it with pride.

#6 The use of Metaphor

Our minds dream in metaphor, think in metaphor and we speak in metaphor, so it makes perfect, rational sense that we must include metaphors in our business story. Everyday we use metaphor to help others understand what we really mean; we sail through exams without ever setting foot on a boat, we climb the corporate ladder sitting at our desk and we devour books using only our eyes. Metaphors serve to assist with the understanding of one concept by using another more concrete concept, such as journey (I sailed through my exam,) objects (climb the corporate ladder) or food (I devour books.) So by using something that people already are familiar with as a metaphor, you can describe the unfamiliar and that will serve you well if you need to make a complex thought simple.

#7 The Structure of Story

I want to start by telling you a story...

The year is 1825, the place is Washington DC, and a gentleman working away from home is about to receive terrible news. A horseman delivers a message that reads: "Your dear wife is convalescent." On hearing the news the gentleman immediately mounts his horse and leaves Washington to be by her side. Covering nearly 300 miles, stopping only for absolute necessities, he finally arrives in Connecticut, only to find his wife has already been buried. He is heartbroken, filled with grief and consumed with guilt. Without delay he sets about inventing a means for rapid, long distance communication, so that no one would ever have to suffer the way he has again. That man's name is Samuel Morse, better known as the inventor of Morse code.

I will now use the story of Samuel Morse to help demonstrate how to find and plot your story. Let's start by learning a simple technique for uncovering the facts behind a story.

#8 The Five Ws

One of the first things I had drummed into me whilst training as journalist is the five Ws: questions that constitute the formula for getting the complete story on a subject.

- Who is it about?
- What happened?
- When did it take place?
- Where did it take place?
- Why did it happen?

So let's take a look and see how the 5 Ws help us construct the Samuel Morse story.

- **Who is it about?**
Samuel Morse, better known as the inventor of Morse code.
- **What happened?**
Samuel Morse invented a useful communication technique.
- **When did it take place?**
1825
- **Where did it take place?**
Between Washington DC and Connecticut.
- **Why did it happen?**
His wife fell ill whilst he was working away from home and by the time he got to her bedside she had already died.

Let us note that collecting the five Ws only furnishes us with the raw facts. The storyteller is charged with positioning those facts into the three acts, which are as follows.

#9 The Three Acts

By applying the three acts rule you will be sure that you have the facts in the correct order. You can also be confident that your business story will fit the natural format that people expect to hear story delivered in.

- Act 1, Problem and Obstacle
- Act 2, Conflict or Struggle
- Act 3, Resolution

So let's see how the facts work for the Samuel Morse story when they are put together as a story, using the three-act method.

Act 1, Problem and Obstacle:

The year is 1825, the place is Washington DC and a gentleman working away from home is about to receive terrible news. A horseman delivers a message that reads: "Your dear wife is convalescent."

Act 2, Conflict or Struggle:

On reading the news, the gentleman immediately mounts his horse and leaves Washington to be by her side. Covering nearly 300 miles, stopping only for absolute necessities, he finally arrives in Connecticut, only to find his wife has already been buried. He is heartbroken, filled with grief and consumed with guilt.

Act 3, Resolution:

Without delay this man sets about inventing a means for rapid, long distance communication, so that no one will ever have to suffer the way he has again. That man's name is Samuel Morse, better known as the inventor of Morse code.

#10 The End

The most important part of the story is the first and the last statement. The first statement of your story sets out the problem, the middle dramatizes the conflict and the last statement delivers the resolve. So the basic rule for ending a story is to write until the conflict is resolved and then bow out gracefully.

And Finally

So will you start using stories to help get your message across? Advertisers have long taken advantage of narrative persuasiveness, by deploying stories into the creative delivery of commercials.

In an interview in the September 2008 edition of the Scientific American Mind magazine, marketing researcher Jennifer Edson Escalas of Vanderbilt University explained that a test audience responded more positively to advertisements in narrative form, as compared with straightforward ads that encouraged viewers to think about the arguments for a product. As the author of the article concluded: 'People accept ideas more readily when their minds are in story mode as opposed to an analytical mind-set.'

Thank you,

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