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Master the Art of Storytelling

> **"Stories are just data with a soul."**
>
> **—BRENÉ BROWN, TEDx HOUSTON 2010**

BRYAN STEVENSON'S GRANDMOTHER WAS THE end of every argument in his family's household. She was also the beginning of a lot of arguments! Above all, she taught Stevenson about the power of identity. Stevenson is a civil rights attorney and the executive director of the Equal Justice Initiative, a nonprofit group that provides legal representation to poor defendants who have been denied fair treatment in the criminal justice system. Stevenson won a landmark Supreme Court case that barred states from imposing mandatory life sentences without parole on juveniles convicted of a felony. The justices ruled five-to-four that such sentences were unconstitutional, violating the Eighth Amendment ban on cruel and unusual punishment.

In September 2011, the Roosevelt Institute awarded Stevenson a Freedom Medal for his work in the area of social justice. A representative from the TED conference was in the audience and asked Stevenson to give a presentation at the March 2012 event in Long Beach. Stevenson told me he didn't know much about TED at the time and was inclined to turn down the invitation because he had two Supreme Court cases to argue at the end of March. His staff "went ballistic" and told Stevenson that he had to speak at TED. Stevenson is glad he did. The TED audience was so inspired by Stevenson's presentation they donated a combined $1 million to his nonprofit.

Over the course of 18 minutes, Stevenson held the audience spellbound as he told stories of several people who had influenced his life: his

grandmother, Rosa Parks, and a janitor. Stevenson began with a story about his grandmother's parents, who were born into slavery, and the experience of how slavery shaped the way she saw the world. She had 10 children, and it was difficult for Stevenson to find time with her. One day, when Stevenson was eight or nine, his grandmother walked across the room, took him by the hand, and said, "Come on, Bryan. You and I are going to have a talk."[1] Stevenson said he would never forget the discussion that happened next.

> She sat me down and she looked at me and she said, "I want you to know I've been watching you." And she said, "I think you're special." She said, "I think you can do anything you want to do." I will never forget it. And then she said, "I just need you to promise me three things, Bryan." I said, "Okay, Mama." She said, "The first thing I want you to promise me is that you'll always love your mom." She said, "That's my baby girl, and you have to promise me now you'll always take care of her." Well I adored my mom, so I said, "Yes, Mama. I'll do that." Then she said, "The second thing I want you to promise me is that you'll always do the right thing even when the right thing is the hard thing." And I thought about it and I said, "Yes, Mama. I'll do that." Then finally she said, "The third thing I want you to promise me is that you'll never drink alcohol."
>
> Well I was nine years old, so I said, "Yes, Mama. I'll do that." [Laughter]

A few years later, Stevenson was in the backwoods near his house with two of his siblings who insisted that he take a sip of beer. Stevenson pushed back and said he didn't feel right about it. "And then my brother started staring at me. He said, 'What's wrong with you? Have some beer.' Then he looked at me real hard and he said, 'Oh, I hope you're not still hung up on that conversation Mama had with you.' And when I asked him what he was talking about said, 'Oh, Mama tells all the grandkids that they're special.'"

2.1: Bryan Stevenson, speaking at TED 2012. Courtesy of James Duncan Davidson/TED (http://duncandavidson.com).

(Laughter.)

I was devastated.

(More laughter.)

Stevenson lowered his voice and said, "I'm going to tell you something I probably shouldn't. I know this might be broadcast broadly. But I'm 52 years old, and I'm going to admit to you that I've never had a drop of alcohol. I don't say that because I think that's virtuous; I say that because there is power in identity. When we create the right kind of identity, we can say things to the world around us that they don't actually believe makes sense. We can get them to do things that they don't think they can do."

The audience, most of whom had been laughing at Stevenson's story about his grandmother, suddenly grew silent as they took in his words. He was reaching their minds, but he could do that only after he had touched their hearts.

Secret 2: Master the Art of Storytelling

Tell stories to reach people's hearts and minds

Why it works: Bryan Stevenson, the speaker who earned the longest standing ovation in TED history, spent 65 percent of his presentation telling stories. Brain scans reveal that stories stimulate and engage the human brain, helping the speaker connect with the audience and making it much more likely that the audience will agree with the speaker's point of view.

BREAK DOWN THE WALL WITH STORIES

Stevenson spoke for five minutes before he introduced his first statistics about how many people are incarcerated in U.S. prisons and the percentage of those who are poor and/or African-American. Data supported his thesis, but a story took up the first one-third of his presentation. It wasn't just any story, either. Stevenson purposely chose to tell a story that made it easy for his audience to connect with him on a personal and emotional level.

"You have to get folks to trust you,"[2] Stevenson told me. "If you start with something too esoteric and disconnected from the lives of everyday people, it's harder for people to engage. I often talk about family members because most of us have family members that we have a relationship to. I talk about kids and people who are vulnerable or struggling. All of those narratives are designed to help understand the issues."

Stevenson talks to many people who have made up their minds to disagree with him well before he says a word. Narrative—storytelling—can help break down the wall between him and the people he needs to persuade. Stevenson says he tells stories to engage judges, jurors, and other decision makers who are inclined to disagree with his perspective. Stevenson has discovered that narrative is the most powerful way to break down resistance.

Stevenson's TED talk is a brilliant example of storytelling because he connected each story to the central theme of "identity." His last story

involved a janitor whom he'd met briefly on his way to a court appointment. Once inside court, the conversation between Stevenson and the judge got especially heated. Stevenson picks up the story.

> Out of the corner of my eye, I could see this janitor pacing back and forth. He kept pacing back and forth. And finally, this older black man with this very worried look on his face came into the courtroom and sat down behind me, almost at counsel table. About 10 minutes later the judge said we would take a break. And during the break there was a deputy sheriff who was offended that the janitor had come into court. And this deputy jumped up and he ran over to this older black man. He said, "Jimmy, what are you doing in this courtroom?" And this older black man stood up and he looked at that deputy and he looked at me and he said, "I came into this courtroom to tell this young man, keep your eyes on the prize, hold on."

Stevenson concluded the presentation by telling the TED audience that they cannot be fully evolved human beings until they care about human rights and basic dignity. "Our visions of technology and design and entertainment and creativity have to be married with visions of humanity, compassion, and justice. And more than anything, for those of you who share that, I've simply come to tell you to keep your eyes on the prize, hold on." Stevenson's audience rose to their feet because his stories had connected with them. He had touched their souls.

Ben Affleck: Director's Notes

> **Actor/director Ben Affleck considers Stevenson's presentation among his favorite TED talks. Affleck has seen many presentations, lectures, and talks about social justice, yet it was Stevenson's conversation—and it was more of a conversation than a formal presentation—that left an indelible impression on Affleck. "Human rights lawyer Bryan Stevenson shares some hard truths about America's justice system … these issues, which are wrapped up in America's unexamined history, are rarely talked about with this level of candor, insight and persuasiveness."[3]**
>
> **—Ben Affleck**

When I spoke with Stevenson, I said, “Your subject is sensitive, controversial, and complex,” and I asked him, “How much of your success do you owe to the effective communication of your story?”

“Almost all of it. There are so many presumptions that will condemn the clients I care about, so my task is to overcome the narratives that have evolved. Almost all of what we’re trying to do turns on effective communication. You need data, facts, and analysis to challenge people, but you also need narrative to get people comfortable enough to care about the community that you are advocating for. Your audience needs to be willing to go with you on a journey.”

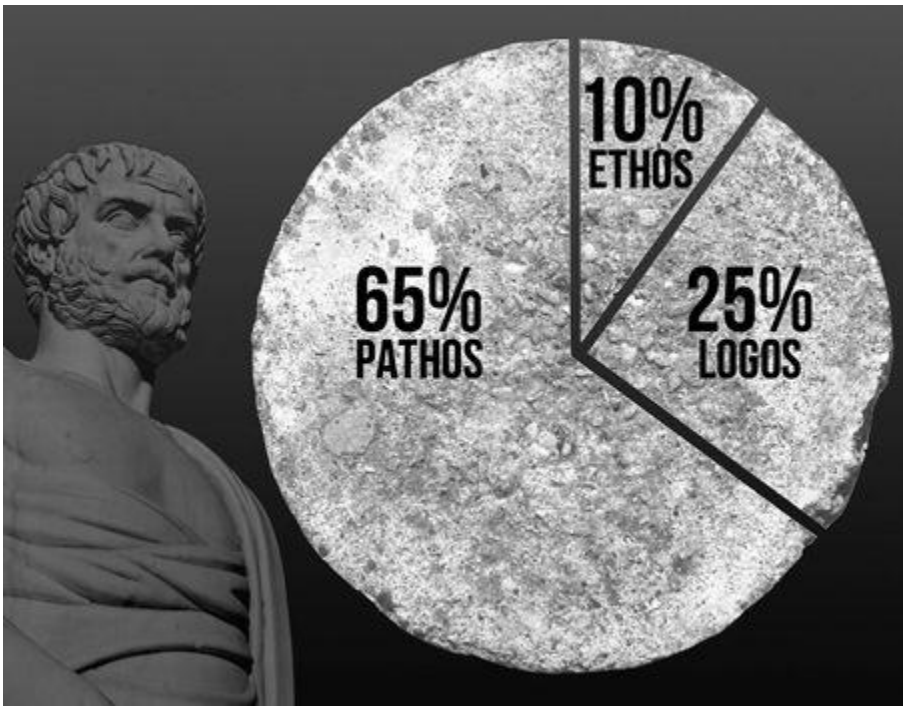
In my interview with Stevenson he validated the core concept in my communications coaching—storytelling is the ultimate tool of persuasion. Brands, as well as individuals, who tell stories—emotional and genuine stories—connect with their customers and audiences in far deeper and more-meaningful ways than do their competitors. Stevenson’s observation should give you confidence, too. Many business professionals are intimidated to tell personal stories in a PowerPoint presentation, especially if the content contains data, charts, and graphs. But if Stevenson, a speaker who successfully argues cases in front of Supreme Court justices, can find power in stories, then the rest of us should take a cue from his experience.

POWER IN PATHOS

Stevenson has pathos. The Greek philosopher Aristotle is one of the founding fathers of communication theory. He believed that persuasion occurs when three components are represented: ethos, logos, and pathos. Ethos is credibility. We tend to agree with people whom we respect for their achievements, title, experience, etc. Logos is the means of persuasion through logic, data, and statistics. Pathos is the act of appealing to emotions.

Bryan Stevenson’s presentation contained 4,057 words. I analyzed those words and assigned them into each of the three categories. If Stevenson talked about his work in prisons, I placed that sentence or paragraph in the

category Ethos. When Stevenson delivered statistics, I added those sentences to the category Logos. If Stevenson told a story, I placed the content under Pathos. The results are shown in the pie chart in figure 2.2.



2.2: Pie Chart: Percentage of Ethos, Logos and Pathos, represented in Bryan Stevenson's TED 2012 presentation. Created by Empowered Presentations @empoweredpres.

As you can see, Ethos made up only 10 percent of Stevenson's content, and Logos only 25 percent. Pathos made up a full 65 percent of Stevenson's talk. Remarkably, Stevenson's talk has been voted one of the most "persuasive" on TED.com. To "persuade" is defined as influencing someone to act by appealing to reason. Emotion doesn't appear in the definition, yet without the emotional impact of stories, Stevenson's talk would have failed to have the influence it's had.

You simply cannot persuade through logic alone. Who says so? Some of the most logical minds in the world.

TEDnote

HOW DO YOU USE ARISTOTLE'S COMPONENTS OF PERSUASION? Take one of your recent presentations and categorize the content into one of the three categories we

just covered: Ethos (credibility), Logos (evidence and data), and Pathos (emotional appeal). How does your pathos stack up against the rest? If your emotional appeal is minimal, you might want to rethink your content before you give this presentation again, like adding more stories, anecdotes, and personal insights.

YOUR BRAIN ON STORIES

Dale Carnegie believed in the power of stories to inspire audiences. "The great truths of the world have often been couched in fascinating stories," Carnegie wrote. Carnegie once said, "The ideas I stand for are not mine. I borrowed them from Socrates. I swiped them from Chesterfield. I stole them from Jesus. And I put them in a book. If you don't like their rules whose would you use?"

Many of the ideas in this book do not belong to me. They do not belong to TED. They do not belong to the awe-inspiring speakers who gave the presentations. The techniques work because they are based on how the human mind works; how it processes and recalls information and how that information gets stamped in our brains. Carnegie based his advice on intuition. Today we have brain scans to prove him right. Scientists using functional MRI (fMRI) images have studied brain activity by tracking changes in blood flow. In the last 10 years we've learned more about the human brain than in all of the combined years humans have been on Earth, and much of that research has direct implications for those who seek to excel in the area of public speaking and communications.

STORIES PLANT IDEAS AND EMOTIONS INTO A LISTENER'S BRAIN

In a darkened conference room on the campus of Princeton University, someone is watching a Charlie Chaplin movie to give the rest of us a deeper insight into how the brain processes information. Uri Hasson, assistant professor of psychology at Princeton, is the psychologist conducting the experiment for the Princeton Neuroscience Institute.

Hasson's experiments include activities such as watching movies or listening to stories while his subjects are connected to fMRI machines to

study their brain waves. Hasson wants to learn how the brain processes complex information. Hasson and his colleagues have discovered that personal stories actually cause the brains of both storyteller and listener to sync up. *Sync up* is my term; Hasson calls it "brain-to-brain coupling."

Hasson and his colleagues recorded the brain activity of a speaker telling unrehearsed stories. Next, they measured the brain activity of the person listening to the story and asked the listener to fill out a detailed questionnaire to measure comprehension. The results are among the first of their kind in the area of neuroscience. The researchers found that the speaker's and the listener's brains "exhibited joint, temporally coupled, response patterns."[4] To put it simply, "The listener's brain responses mirrored the speaker's brain responses." There was actually a mind-meld between the speaker and the listener.

Hasson chose a graduate student to be the speaker. Lauren Silbert told a personal story about going to her prom. Researchers scanned her brain and the brains of the 11 students who were listening. The same parts of everyone's brain showed "activation," meaning a deep connection between the person doing the talking and the person doing the listening. It also suggested that everyone in the room—all the listeners—was experiencing a similar response! The "coupling" did not occur when the listeners were told a story in Russian, a language they didn't know.

"When the woman spoke English, the volunteers understood her story, and their brains synchronized. When she had activity in her insula, the region in the brain responsible for emotion, the listeners did too. When her frontal cortex lit up, so did theirs. By simply telling a story, the woman could plant ideas, thoughts, and emotions into the listeners' brains,"[5] reports Hasson.

Researchers have discovered that our brains are more active when we hear stories. A wordy PowerPoint slide with bullet points activates the language-processing center of the brain, where we turn words into meaning. Stories do much more, using the whole brain and activating language, sensory, visual, and motor areas.

Hassan's findings are profoundly important for anyone who needs to deliver a presentation with the intent of influencing behavior. If stories trigger brain-to-brain "coupling," then part of the solution to winning people over to your argument is to tell more stories.

STORIES ARE JUST DATA WITH A SOUL

In June 2010, Brené Brown delivered the talk "The Power of Vulnerability" at TEDx Houston. As a research professor at the University of Houston, Brown studies vulnerability, courage, authenticity, and shame. It's a pretty big subject area to squeeze into 18 minutes, yet Brown did it so well that her presentation has been viewed more than seven million times. Brown began her presentation with a short anecdote.

> A couple of years ago, an event planner called me because I was going to do a speaking event. And she called, and she said, "I'm really struggling with how to write about you on the little flier." And I thought, "Well, what's the struggle?" And she said, "Well, I saw you speak, and I'm going to call you a researcher, I think, but I'm afraid if I call you a researcher, no one will come because they'll think you're boring and irrelevant." And I was like, "Okay." And she said, "But the thing I liked about your talk is you're a storyteller. So I think what I'll do is just call you a storyteller."[6]

Brown said the "insecure" part of her was hesitant to adopt the title because she was a serious academic researcher. However, she eventually warmed to the idea. "I thought, you know, I am a storyteller. I'm a qualitative researcher. I collect stories; that's what I do. Maybe stories are just data with a soul. And maybe I'm just a storyteller." As Brown suggests, we're all storytellers. You're telling stories every day. In a business presentation, you're telling the story behind your campaign, company, or product. In a job interview, you're telling the story behind your personal brand. In a marketing pitch, you're telling the story about your idea. Yes, we're all storytellers and we're telling stories in business each and every day.

I'll never forget the one time I received a severe reprimand from my professor at the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern. I had returned from an assignment empty-handed. "There was no story," I told my instructor. He got so angry that I thought he would blow a blood vessel in his forehead. "There's always a story!" he yelled. I always recall that encounter when I hear someone say, "I don't have a story." Sure you do. There's always a story. All you have to do is look, and if you look hard and smart enough, you'll be sure to find a good one.

> **"We all love stories. We're born for them. Stories affirm who we are. We all want affirmations that our lives have meaning. And nothing does a greater affirmation than when we connect through stories. It can cross the barriers of time, past, present and future, and allow us to experience the similarities between ourselves and through others, real and imagined."**[7]
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> **—Andrew Stanton, writer of "Toy Story," TED February 2012**

THREE SIMPLE, EFFECTIVE TYPES OF STORIES

Inspiring communicators and the best TED presenters stick to one of three types of stories. The first are personal stories that relate directly to the theme of the conversation or presentation; second are stories about other people who have learned a lesson the audience can relate to; third are stories involving the success or failure of products or brands.

Personal Stories

Stories are central to who we are. The most popular TED presentations start with a personal story. Recall the touching stories Bryan Stevenson told about his grandmother and the janitor who gave him an energizing piece of advice: "keep your eyes on the prize." The ability to tell a personal story is an essential trait of authentic leadership—people who inspire uncommon effort. So, tell personal stories. What are your fondest memories of a loved one? You probably have a story to tell about that person. My daughters enjoy hearing stories of their grandfather (their "nonno") who was held captive in World War II, how he tried to escape, and how he and my mom

eventually emigrated to America with $20 in their pocket. Stories like this one are central to our identity as a family. I'm sure it's the same for you.

If you're going to tell a "personal" story, make it personal. Take the audience on a journey. Make it so descriptive and rich with imagery that they imagine themselves with you at the time of the event.

A Burn Unit Inspires a Career and a Groundbreaking Presentation

Professor of psychology and behavioral economist at Duke University and bestselling author Dan Ariely develops clever studies to demonstrate why people make predictably irrational decisions. His interest in the subject started in the burn unit with his personal story. "I was burned very badly. And if you spend a lot of time in hospitals, you'll see a lot of types of irrationalities. And the one that particularly bothered me in the burn department was the process by which the nurses took the bandage off me,"[8] Ariely told a TED audience in 2009.

In graphic detail he explained how bandages could be ripped off quickly or slowly. If you're like most people—and Ariely's nurses—you probably assume it's better to strip off the bandages quickly to get the pain over with. It took the nurses one hour to rip off the bandages. Ariely, in massive pain, pleaded with the nurses to take two hours instead of one, making the pain less intense. The nurses said they knew best and Ariely had to endure the pain.

Ariely left the hospital three years later (70 percent of his body had been burned) and entered a Tel Aviv University. There he examined the question of how to take bandages off burn patients. "What I learned was that the nurses were wrong. Here were wonderful people with good intentions and plenty of experience, and nevertheless they were getting things wrong predictably all the time. It turns out that because we don't encode duration in the way that we encode intensity, I would have had less pain if the duration would have been longer and the intensity was lower."

Ariely also uses a very effective storytelling technique—unexpectedness. In *Made to Stick*, Dan and Chip Heath reveal several elements of a "sticky" idea, one that people remember. According to the Heaths, "The most basic way to get someone's attention is this: Break a pattern."[9] Curiosity and mystery are powerful ways to get our attention. For evidence, the Heaths cite George Loewenstein's work at Carnegie Mellon University. "Curiosity, he says, happens when we feel a gap in our knowledge … gaps cause pain. When we want to know something but don't, it's like having an itch that we need to scratch. To take away the pain, we need to fill the knowledge gap. We sit patiently through bad movies, even though they may be painful to watch, because it's too painful not to know how they end."[10]

Ariely's personal story is made more effective because its outcome is unexpected. Tell personal stories, but choose them carefully. A personal experience that led to an unexpected result often makes for a particularly compelling story.

Mom's Personal Fiscal Cliff

Personal stories grab attention in nearly every communications format—presentations, social media, and television interviews. I started my journalism career in 1989, the last year Ronald Reagan was in office. Reagan was called the Great Communicator because he could wrap his message in a story. When I left day-to-day journalism to start my own communications practice, I remembered the quality that gave Reagan his charisma—his ability to tell a story.

Today I give CEOs and politicians the same advice: if you want to be quoted, tell a story, and the more personal the better. It works nearly every time. For example, in December 2012, the U.S. media was obsessed about the "fiscal cliff," a combination of automatic spending cuts and tax increases that would have gone into effect had lawmakers failed to reach a budget deal. A new member of Congress called me about one hour before a scheduled television interview. He wanted to run some messages by me. All I heard were "talking points" so I politely suggested he tell stories instead. We decided that he should tell a story about his mother, a nurse, and how

the fiscal cliff would impact her. The congressman told the story, the reporter aired the story, and the politician used it for every one of his subsequent interviews. Sometimes the congressman was successful in getting his talking points across; other times he was not. His mother, however, always made the cut.

People love stories. Business professionals rarely tell personal stories, which is one reason why they make such an impact when they do. Today when I coach CEOs for press interviews or major presentations, I always encourage them to incorporate a personal story. Reporters and bloggers who cover the event include the story nearly every time. No technique is 100 percent guaranteed, but telling personal stories comes close.

Stories about Other People

Sir Ken Robinson, a PhD and thought leader in the area of creativity and innovation in education and business, says schools kill creativity. Millions of people clearly agree with him or have found his argument so provocative that they feel compelled to view and share his 2006 TED talk. It's the most popular TED talk of all time (14 million views at the time of this writing). I'm fascinated by Robinson's presentation because he uses no PowerPoint, no visuals, no props, yet he still connects with the audience. He does it through the skillful use of analysis, data, humor, and storytelling.

Schools That Nurture (Not Undermine) Creativity

Robinson's most intriguing and gripping story does not involve himself. Its central character is someone whom Robinson had interviewed. Her name was Gillian Lynne, and few in the audience had ever heard of her. They had, however, heard of her work. Lynne was the choreographer behind *Cats* and *Phantom of the Opera*. Robinson asked Lynne how she had become a dancer. She said that when she was going to school in the 1930s, her school administrators believed she had a learning disorder because she couldn't concentrate and was always fidgeting. "I think now they'd say she had ADHD. Wouldn't you? But this was the 1930s, and ADHD hadn't been invented at this point. It wasn't an available condition. People weren't aware they could have that,"[11] Robinson said dryly as the audience laughed.

Robinson continued the story with Lynne's visit to a specialist whom her mother had brought her to see. After listening to Lynne and her mother for about 20 minutes, the doctor told Lynne that he would like to speak to her mother privately. "But as they went out of the room, he turned on the radio that was sitting on his desk. And when they got out of the room, he said to her mother, 'Just stand and watch her.' And the minute they left the room, she said, she was on her feet, moving to the music. And they watched for a few minutes, and he turned to her mother and said, 'Mrs. Lynne, Gillian isn't sick; she's a dancer. Take her to a dance school.'" Lynne did go to dance school. She had a career at the Royal Ballet, met Sir Andrew Lloyd Webber, and has been responsible for choreographing some of the greatest musicals in the history of theater.

Robinson uses the story as a setup to the conclusion of his presentation and to reinforce his theme: "What TED celebrates is the gift of the human imagination. We have to be careful now that we use this gift wisely and that we avert some of the scenarios that we've talked about. And the only way we'll do it is by seeing our creative capacities for the richness they are and seeing our children for the hope that they are. And our task is to educate their whole being, so they can face this future."

Robinson's call to "educate their whole being" would be hard for the audience to fully comprehend had he not told the story of Gillian Lynne. Abstractions are difficult for most people to process. Stories turn abstract concepts into tangible, emotional, and memorable ideas.

A TED-worthy Preacher Tells Stories from the Pulpit

Lakewood Church pastor Joel Osteen has never given a TED talk, but he gives a TED-worthy performance every week to 40,000 people who attend his sermons in person and another seven million who watch him on television.

In TED fashion, Osteen always begins a sermon with a theme. He started one sermon, "I want to talk to you today about how 'Yes Is in Your Future.'[12]. He followed with a short anecdote about a friend of his. The

friend had been working hard for years. One day a supervisor retired and several people were up for the job. Osteen's friend had seniority and had been faithful to the company, yet he was turned down for the promotion in favor of a younger and less-experienced person. The friend felt cheated but "he didn't get bitter or quit doing his best." Two years later, a senior vice president retired and Osteen's friend got the promotion he deserved. "His position now is many levels higher than that old supervisor position," Osteen said. "You might be in a 'no' right now but favor is coming. Healing is coming. Promotion is coming. Say to yourself, 'I'm not going to get stuck in a no. I know a yes is coming.'"

After establishing pathos with the audience, Osteen turned to logos and shared the following statistics with the audience. He said that 90 percent of all first businesses fail. Ninety percent of all second businesses succeed, yet 80 percent of business owners never try a second time. "They failed to realize that they were a few 'no's' away from seeing their business succeed."

Osteen followed the statistics with many more stories. Characters included biblical figures, people who attended Lakewood services, historical personalities (Albert Einstein failed 2,000 times), and his own mother, who was seated in the front row. Osteen told one story about a friend with a reasonably successful small business. The friend wanted to expand and went to the bank he had been doing business with for years. He had a business plan and proven results. The bank turned him down. A second bank turned him down. "Ten banks, then twenty banks … you'd think he'd get the message," Osteen said. "Thirty banks turned him down. Then another one. Thirty-one banks said no. Then bank number thirty-two came along and said, 'We like your idea. We'll take a chance on you.' When God puts a dream in your heart, you know you're going to succeed. Every 'no' means you're one step closer to 'yes.'"

Personal stories are stories about yourself, but they can also be stories about other people with whom the audience can empathize. Osteen shares a quality with popular TED speakers: they are masters at creating empathy. Empathy is the capacity to recognize and feel emotions experienced by

somebody else. We put ourselves in the shoes of the other. We've seen how stories can help us "experience" someone else's emotions. Some famous neuroscientists believe we are hardwired for empathy, that it's the social glue that holds society together. In a presentation you can create empathy by talking about yourself *or* someone else.

> **"The truthful, inside story of almost any man's life—if told modestly and without offending egotism—is most entertaining. It is almost sure-fire speech material."**
>
> **—Dale Carnegie**

Stories about Brand Success

When I give a keynote presentation I tell personal stories, stories about other individuals whom I know personally, have interviewed, or have read about, and stories of brands that have successfully leveraged the business strategy I'm discussing.

I'm always looking for stories for my columns and presentations. I find them everywhere. I walked onto a Virgin America plane, talked to the pilots, and was surprised to learn that they monitor the brands' Twitter feed. That led to a story about brands that use social media to have conversations with their customers. When I stayed at a Ritz-Carlton hotel, I asked a waiter why he gave me a free appetizer. He said, "I'm empowered to deliver a great customer experience." That led to several stories on employee engagement and customer service. I walked into an Apple Store and discovered that employees are trained to walk a customer through five steps that either lead to a sale or promote brand loyalty. That experience led not only to a story, I wrote an entire book about it. Brand stories are everywhere.

Popular blogger and TED speaker Seth Godin also tells brand stories and does so brilliantly. In February 2003 Godin taught the TED audience how to get their ideas to spread. The video became a hit and has attracted more than 1.5 million views. U2 lead singer Bono said it was his favorite TED presentation. "Describing a revolution in media in the most unrevolutionary

terms, this talk is an understatement,"[13] said Bono. "Godin is a smart, funny dude."

A Smart, Funny Dude with a Story to Tell

Godin tells three stories that support his theme: smart marketers promote their products differently; ordinary is boring. Godin persuasively argues that the riskiest thing to do is "be safe," or average, and he uses short and simple stories to do it.

In a story about Wonder Bread, Godin tells the audience:

> This guy named Otto Rohwedder invented sliced bread, and he focused, like most inventors did, on the patent part and the making part. And the thing about the invention of sliced bread is this—that for the first 15 years after sliced bread was available no one bought it; no one knew about it; it was a complete and total failure. And the reason is that until Wonder came along and figured out how to spread the idea of sliced bread, no one wanted it. That the success of sliced bread, like the success of almost everything we've been talking about at this conference, is not always about what the patent is like, or what the factory is like—it's about can you get your idea to spread, or not.

In another story Godin showed a photo of a famous Frank Gehry–designed building. "Frank Gehry didn't just change a museum; he changed an entire city's economy by designing one building that people from all over the world went to see. Now, at countless meetings at, you know, the Portland City Council, or who knows where, they said, we need an architect—can we get Frank Gehry? Because he did something that was at the fringes."

Finally, here is how Godin told the story behind Silk soymilk: "Silk. Put a product that does not need to be in the refrigerated section next to the milk in the refrigerated section. Sales tripled. Why? Milk, milk, milk, milk, milk—not milk. For the people who were there and looking at that section, it was remarkable. They didn't triple their sales with advertising; they tripled it by doing something remarkable."[14]

Godin's stories all feature brands that are remarkable. The next time you see Silk or Wonder Bread in the grocery store, you'll think differently about the brand and about the messages you use to stand out in the marketplace of ideas.

Larger companies are discovering that stories put a human face on an otherwise faceless conglomerate. Tostitos, Taco Bell, Domino's Pizza, Kashi, McDonald's, and Starbucks are turning to commercials that highlight farmers who grow the ingredients behind their products. People are more engaged with products when they know where those products come from and if they get to know the real people behind those products. The Lush chain of soap stores puts a small picture of a real employee on each product—the faces are those of people who actually made the product. Lush believes that every product has a story. There's a reason why many successful brands spend millions on advertising that includes real faces, real people, and real stories. It works.

A Rich Man's Convenience and a Poor Man's Lifesaver

Every product has a story, as does every startup entrepreneur who built those products. Twenty-one-year-old Ludwick Marishane of Cape Town, South Africa, was named the 2011 global student entrepreneur of the year all because he didn't want to take a bath. Marishane invented DryBath, the world's first non-water-based bath-substitute lotion.

If Marishane crafted an elevator pitch for his invention it would go something like this: "DryBath is the world's first and only bath-substituting skin gel. You apply it to your skin and you don't need to bathe." What's missing? The why and the what. Why did he invent it and what's the benefit of it? Stories fill in the blanks.

At TED Johannesburg in May 2012, Marishane told a story to explain the why and the what. "I grew up in Limpopo, in a little town called Motetema. Water and electricity supply are as unpredictable as the weather and growing up in these tough situations, at the age of 17, I was relaxing with a couple of friends of mine in winter and we were sunbathing. The Limpopo sun gets really hot in winter. As we were sunbathing, my best friend next to me says, 'Man, why doesn't somebody invent something that you can just

put on your skin and then you don't have to bathe?' As I sat, I thought, 'Man, I would buy that!'"[15]

Marishane went home, conducted research, and found "shocking" statistics. He learned that over 2.5 billion people in the world do not have proper access to sanitation, 5 million of whom are in South Africa. Horrible diseases thrive in these environments. For example, trachoma blinds 8 million people every year. "The shocking part about it is that all you have to do to prevent being infected with trachoma is wash your face," Marishane said. With nothing but a cell phone and very limited access to the Internet, Marishane did the research and wrote a 40-page business plan. Four years later he received a patent and DryBath was born. Its value proposition: "DryBath is a rich man's convenience and a poor man's lifesaver."

Every brand, every product, has a story. Find it and tell it.

What is a story? Jonah Sachs offers this definition in *Winning the Story Wars*: "Stories are a particular type of human communication designed to persuade an audience of a storyteller's worldview. The storyteller does this by placing characters, real or fictional, onto a stage and showing what happens to these characters over a period of time. Each character pursues some type of goal in accordance with his or her values, facing difficulty along the way, and either succeeds or fails according to the storyteller's view of how the world works."[16] Sachs believes that in the battlefield of ideas, marketers have a secret weapon—a well-told story. Sachs says that contemporary audiences are so bombarded by messages that they are more resistant and more skeptical than at any other time in history. However, "These same audiences, when inspired, are willing and able to spread their favorite messages, creating a massive viral effect for those who win their love."

Gladwell, Happiness, and Spaghetti Sauce

At the Monterey TED conference of February 2004, *The Tipping Point* author, Malcolm Gladwell, told a simple story about Howard Moskowitz, a man who became famous for reinventing spaghetti sauce. The title of the presentation was "Choice, Happiness, and Spaghetti Sauce."

The story went like this. Campbell's Soup approached Moskowitz to help the company make a spaghetti sauce that would compete against Ragu, the

dominant sauce of the 1970s and 1980s (Campbell's made Prego). It seems as though Prego was struggling despite being a higher-quality product. Moskowitz worked with the company to create 45 varieties of spaghetti sauce. He brought them on the road to have average consumers taste-test each one.

> If you sit down, and you analyze all this data on spaghetti sauce, you realize that all Americans fall into one of three groups. There are people who like their spaghetti sauce plain; there are people who like their spaghetti sauce spicy; and there are people who like it extra-chunky. And of those three facts, the third one was the most significant, because at the time, in the early 1980s, if you went to a supermarket, you would not find extra-chunky spaghetti sauce. And Prego turned to Howard, and they said, "You're telling me that one-third of Americans crave extra-chunky spaghetti sauce and yet no one is servicing their needs?" And he said yes! And Prego then went back, and completely reformulated their spaghetti sauce, and came out with a line of extra-chunky that immediately and completely took over the spaghetti sauce business in this country. And over the next 10 years, they made 600 million dollars off their line of extra-chunky sauces.[17]

The entire food industry took notice of Moskowitz's analysis. It's why we have "fourteen different kinds of mustards and seventy-one different kinds of olive oil," according to Gladwell. Ragu even hired Moskowitz and today we have 36 varieties of Ragu spaghetti sauce. Gladwell told the Moskowitz story in 10 minutes. He spent the remaining seven minutes offering the lessons the story teaches us. For example, people don't know what they want and, if they do, they have a hard time articulating what they truly desire.

> Assumption number one in the food industry used to be that the way to find out what people want to eat—what will make people happy—is to ask them. And for years and years and years and years, Ragu and Prego would have focus groups, and they would sit all you people down, and they would say, "What do you want in a spaghetti sauce?" And for all those years—20, 30 years—through all those focus group

> sessions, no one ever said they wanted extra-chunky. Even though at least a third of them, deep in their hearts, actually did.

Gladwell ended his presentation with what he called the most beautiful lesson of all: "In embracing the diversity of human beings, we will find a surer way to true happiness."

Gladwell succeeds because he combines a "hero" story (which you'll learn more about later in this chapter) about a particular individual with a successful brand story. Your audience wants someone or something to cheer for. They want to be inspired. Give them a hero. Captivate their imagination with stories about yourself, other people, or successful brands.

TEDnote

> **WHAT STORY CAN YOU INCLUDE? Think about a story (either personal, about someone else, or related to a brand) that you can include in your communications or in your next presentation. If you already do this, then you are one step closer to being a TED-worthy communicator. In a business presentation, telling stories is the virtual equivalent of taking people on a field trip, helping them to experience the content at a much more profound level.**

LEAD WITH STORIES AND SUCCEED IN BUSINESS

A well-told story gives leaders a strong advantage in today's increasingly competitive marketplace. A powerful narrative can persuade customers, employees, investors, and stakeholders that your company, product, or idea can help them achieve the success they desire.

We are all natural storytellers, but somehow we lose this part of ourselves when we enter the corporate world. It's especially true when we give PowerPoint presentations. We fall into presentation mode and forget that the most effective way of delivering information is through the emotional connection of story. Stories make concepts and ideas real and tangible. "For too long the business world has ignored or belittled the power of oral narrative, preferring soulless PowerPoint slides, facts, figures, and data,"[18] says Peter Guber, president of Mandalay Entertainment. Guber, who produced such films as *Batman* and *The Color Purple*, wrote an entire book

on the power of storytelling titled *Tell to Win*. He adds, "But as the noise level of modern life has become a cacophony, the ability to tell a purposeful story that can truly be heard is increasingly in demand."

Batman Producer Closes His Eyes for Magic

I've spoken to Guber about the power of story in presentations. As Guber looked back on his successful entertainment career, he realized that much of his success was attributed to his ability to persuade customers, employees, shareholders, media, and partners through storytelling. Guber said he lost big business deals because he threw potential investors a barrage of data, stats, and forecasts while neglecting to engage with them emotionally. "To succeed, you have to persuade others to support your vision, dream, or cause. Whether you want to motivate your executives, organize your shareholders, shape your media, engage your customers, win over your investors, or land a job, you have to deliver a clarion call that will get your listeners' attention, emotionalize your goal as theirs, and move them to act in your favor. You have to reach their hearts as well as their minds—and this is just what storytelling does."[19]

In the early 1990s an incident in Guber's office made him realize that a story—compellingly told—can persuade even the most hardened business executive like himself. At the time, Guber was the CEO of Sony Pictures. Magic Johnson and his business partner, Ken Lombard, visited Guber in his office, and the first thing Lombard said was, "Close your eyes. We're going to tell you a story about a foreign country."[20] Guber thought it a little "unorthodox," but he shut his eyes and went along with it. Lombard continued, "This is a land with a strong customer base, great location, and qualified investors. You know how to build theaters in Europe, Asia, and South America. You know how to invest in foreign countries that have different languages, different cultures, different problems. What you do, Peter, is you find a partner in the country who speaks the language, knows the culture, and handles local problems. Right?" Guber nodded in agreement as his eyes remained shut. "Well, what if I told you a promised land exists that already speaks English, craves movies, has plenty of

available real estate, and no competition? This promised land is about six miles from here."

Lombard and Johnson were pitching Guber on building movie theaters in underserved urban communities. Lombard and Johnson cast themselves as the heroes of the narrative, the characters who would help Guber navigate the waters to reach the promised land. In the first four weeks of opening, the first Magic Johnson Theater was one of the top five highest-grossing theaters in the Sony chain.

Guber reminded me that storytelling should be part of every discussion intended to persuade a listener to back your idea—whether it's a formal presentation or a casual conversation. Guber says that as he looks back at his 40 decades in business, his ability to persuade customers, employees, shareholders, and partners through storytelling has been his single biggest competitive advantage.

The Power of Words

> **Avoid overused buzzwords and clichés. Marketers love to use words such as *leading, solutions,* and *ecosystem*. These words are empty, meaningless, and used so often they've lost whatever punch they may once have had.**
>
> **Overused metaphors can also be boring. According to a study featured in *The New York Times*, "The way the brain handles metaphors has also received extensive study; some scientists have contended that figures of speech like 'a rough day' are so familiar that they are treated simply as words and no more."[21] Brain scans are revealing that when people hear a detailed description, "an evocative metaphor or an emotional exchange between characters," different areas of the brain are stimulated. Just hearing "the smell of lavender" activates the part of the brain involved in smell. "When subjects in their laboratory read a metaphor involving texture, the sensory cortex, responsible for perceiving texture through touch, became active. Metaphors like 'The singer had a velvet voice' and 'He had leathery hands' roused the sensory cortex." When you tell a story, by all means use metaphors, analogies, and vivid language, but eliminate clichés, buzzwords, and jargon. Your audience will tune out phrases they've heard a million times.**

Meet David and Susan

When Toshiba Medical Systems introduced a revolutionary new CT scan, I met with a group of executives to help them shape the story for its global launch. The three-dimensional views of the heart and brain that the machine displayed were indeed impressive, but how could we give an equally impressive presentation without drowning the audience in mind-numbing data? We told a story.

At the press conference we introduced David and Susan, two people who really didn't exist but who did for the purposes of the launch. The presentation demonstrated how this new piece of medical equipment could dramatically cut down the time for doctors to make an accurate diagnosis, thereby saving the lives of the two characters. We gave "David" and "Susan" names, faces, and offered detailed information about their lives. We wanted the audience to see themselves or their loved ones in the faces presented on the screen. Physicians attending the conference later told the speakers that the "David and Susan" part of the presentation was their favorite sequence. It delivered information and made an emotional connection at the same time. That's what a powerful story can do.

You don't have to be launching a revolutionary product like the iPhone or a $2 million piece of medical equipment to tell a good story. During a job interview, tell a personal story about your success managing a team or executing a difficult project. In a new business pitch, share a story about how your product helped a client increase sales despite the economic downturn. During a product launch, tell a personal story behind the product's inception. You might be surprised at how many people remember the stories you tell.

GIVE ME ONE CHARACTER I CAN ROOT FOR

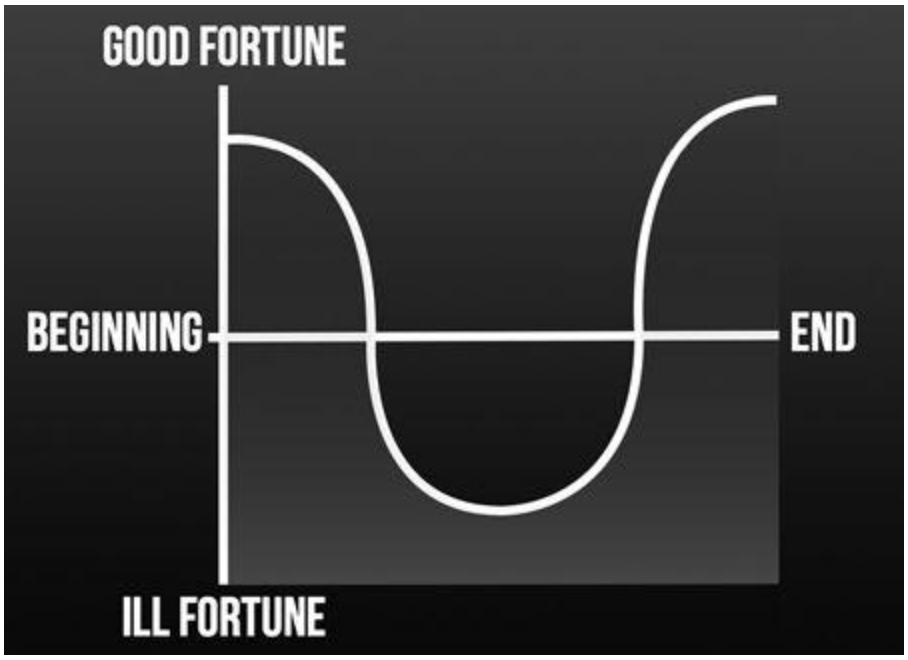
The twentieth-century American writer Kurt Vonnegut was considered a masterful storyteller. A video clip surfaced on the Internet that showed Vonnegut explaining the shape of popular stories. Successful stories—those that connect emotionally with most people—have simple shapes. To illustrate, he drew two lines on a graph (see figure 2.3). On the *y* axis he

wrote I for “Ill Fortune” and the letter G for “Good Fortune.” On the *x* axis he wrote the letter B for “Beginning” and the letter E for “End.”

A Story with a 2,700 Percent Return

> **Significantobjects.com is a Web site dedicated to the power of story. Significant Objects was a social and anthropological experience devised by Rob Walker and Joshua Glenn. The two researchers started with a hypothesis: a writer can invent a story about an object, investing the object with subjective significance that raises its objective value. The researchers curated objects from thrift stores and garage sales. The objects would cost no more than a buck or two. The second phase of the experiment saw a writer create a short, fictional story about the object. In the third step, the object was auctioned on eBay.**
>
> **The researchers purchased $128.74 worth of objects. The thrift-store “junk” sold for a total of $3,612.51. The men had discovered that narrative could invest ordinary objects with extraordinary significance. A story had raised the average products’ prices by 2,700 percent. For example, a fake banana cost 25 cents and sold on eBay for $76 after a story was added. A tiny miniature turkey dinner was acquired for free (the owner just wanted it off the shelf) and sold for $30 after Jenny Offill wrote a creative story about it. According to the Significant Objects site, “Stories are such a powerful driver of emotional value that their effect on any given object’s subjective value can actually be measured objectively.”[22]**

He called the first story shape “Man in a Hole.” “Somebody gets into trouble; gets out of it again. People love that story. They never get sick of it!”[23] The second story shape was called “Boy Gets Girl.” The story starts with an average person on an average day and something good happening to that person. Of course, the person comes close to losing the good fortune and gets it back again to end the story happily. “People love that,” Vonnegut said. He then said the last story shape was the most popular in Western civilization. “Every time it’s retold, someone makes another million dollars. You’re welcome to do it,” Vonnegut said with a smile.



2.3: Re-creation of Kurt Vonnegut's story chart. Created by Empowered Presentations @empoweredpres.

If you want to grip your audience, the story needs to start at the bottom of the G–I access, with terrible misfortune. "Let's start with a little girl. Her mother has died. Her father has remarried a vile-tempered ugly woman with two nasty daughters. You've heard it?" The audience roars with laughter as they see that Vonnegut is outlining the Cinderella story arc. "There's a party at the palace that night and she can't go." After the fairy godmother helps her get ready for the party and she meets a prince, the protagonist stumbles again, slightly below the G–I line but not all the way to the bottom again. As the story continues, the shoe fits, she marries the prince, and "achieves off-scale happiness."

Vonnegut's writing advice: "give the reader at least one character he or she can root for."

I had Vonnegut's storytelling table in mind when I worked with an executive for Chase, a major U.S. bank, to help him prepare the content for a keynote presentation he was asked to give for the United Way. He had personally benefited from United Way programs, but the story he had intended to tell was about his company's commitment to the organization,

how much employees had contributed, etc. His early slides were also laden with charts and figures. Good information, but not very emotional.

“Let’s forget the slides for a moment. Tell me about your personal connection to United Way,” I said. What he said next caught me by surprise.

“I was two years old when my father abandoned the entire family. I was four years old when my mom remarried and that’s when I learned the definition of abuse. My first vivid memory was my mother lying in a pile of glass and my stepfather standing over her threatening to cut her throat if she didn’t do exactly what he said. I remember thinking, where is my father and why is he allowing this man to do this to us?”

The executive went on to tell me how he grew into a very angry young man. At the age of 25 he enrolled in a United Way agency and credited the program for teaching him how to take control of his attitude and putting him on the right path. It also taught him how to become a great father. “I’m proud of the man I’ve become. I’m proud of what they taught me,” he said.

After the goose bumps subsided I encouraged the executive to throw out his existing PowerPoint and open with stories and photographs. That’s exactly what he did, showing a black-and-white picture of his biological father holding him and his brother, pictures of his mother, followed by current photographs of him and his family, “the man he had become.” This executive received a standing ovation from his audience, brought many to tears, and, after he repeated the presentation for an internal audience of employees, elicited the largest employee contributions of any division within his bank.

The United Way presentation I just described is an extreme example—I’m not asking you to reveal all the skeletons in your family closet. I am urging you, however, to embrace a personal story that has meaning to you and to your topic, own it, and share it.

TEDnote

INTRODUCE HEROES AND VILLAINS. Whether it's a movie or a novel, every great story has a hero and a villain. A strong business presentation has the same cast of characters. A spokesperson reveals a challenge (villain) facing a business or industry. The protagonist (brand hero) rises to meet the challenge. Finally, the townspeople (customers) are freed from the villain, the struggle is over, and everyone lives happily ever after. In some cases the villain can be an actual person or competitor, but tread carefully in these cases. Above all, make sure the hero—your product, your brand, or your idea—comes in to save the day.

When TED invites people to speak at its annual conference, it sends out a stone tablet with the 10 TED Commandments written on it. The fourth commandment reads, Thou Shalt Tell a Story. The novelist Isabele Allende didn't need to be told. She makes a living writing stories about passion.

In Allende's 2007 TED talk, she revealed the recipe for great characters. "Nice people with common sense do not make interesting characters. They only make good former spouses,"[24] Allende said to a roomful of laughter. "Passion lives here," she continued. "Heart is what drives us and determines our fate. That is what I need for my characters in my books: a passionate heart. I need mavericks, dissidents, adventurers, outsiders and rebels, who ask questions, bend the rules and take risks. People like all of you in this room."

Secret #2: Master the Art of Storytelling

Great speakers are indeed mavericks, adventurers, and rule-bending rebels who take risks. They tell stories to express their passion for the subject and to connect with their audiences. Ideas are the currency of the twenty-first century and stories facilitate the exchange of that currency. Stories illustrate, illuminate, and inspire.