

Chapter 16 – Storytelling

“Marketing is no longer about the stuff that you make, but about the stories that you tell.”
Seth Godin

Chapter Goals

Examine the good and the bad of using stories in sales.

Introduce the Pixar Seven-Step Story Spine.

Learn how to fine-tune and humanize your technical story.

Storytelling is about as old as human language. Our prehistoric ancestors used stories to make sense of their lives and nature, and surroundings. Their stories were a way to share knowledge and preserve history. You can see visual stories in the ancient caves of Lascaux and Sulawesi dating back some 20,000 years. We live in the story.

Think back to when you were a small child, sitting on the lap of one of your parents or your grandparents. They told you stories to keep you entertained and to teach you about the world. (They also told you stories to make you fall asleep – but that is not a positive outcome for a book about sales!) From the earliest stages of your life, you used stories to communicate. As adults, we continue to tell stories, even though we don’t realize it. Some studies¹ show that 65% of our daily conversations are based on the use of stories.

Yet most Sales Engineers tell me that *“Stories are for sales and marketing people. We deal in facts, figures, and the reality of what the product or service can do. That is the environment where we are most comfortable”*. Balance that with (ironically) the statistic from one customer that the average sales presentation contains 1.5 numbers every minute. How can you possibly expect the customer to remember any of that and make coherent sense of your pitch?

That is where the effective use of storytelling comes into play. You are not writing a best-selling novel or a Hollywood hit. Instead, you are being asked to look at yet another way to make your message stick. Storytelling allows you to literally *“drop the MIC.”* That is **M**emorable, **I**nteresting, and **C**ompelling!

The Good And The Bad Of Stories And Sales

Every story has a beginning. We can start by looking at the positives and the negatives of using stories in a sales situation – as shown in Table 16.1.

The Positives Of Stories	The Negatives of Stories
Captures the attention of the audience	Can seem lightweight
Motivates people to take action	You can miss the mark and not connect
Builds trust and rapport	A bad story is a BAD story
Makes facts and data “sing.”	Easy to ramble and lose focus
Creates sticky information to improve retention	Hard data techies don’t always get it.
Transforms beliefs and change minds	May appear as artificial
Humanizes the speaker	Can include irrelevant material

Table 16.1 The Good And The Bad Of Stories

The items on the negative side of the table can seem daunting, especially to the logical process-oriented SE who is uncomfortable with the softer side of selling. Yet that same SE tells multiple stories every day about how their application crashed, how they fixed a bug, or how they MacGyveredⁱⁱ two products to work together. Extend that to the story about the idiot who cut them off in traffic or the rude Uber driver – we all use stories to communicate.

It turns out that the positives greatly outweigh the negatives.

What Makes A Good Story – Structure And Syntax

We will apply our engineering discipline and examine what makes a good story.

1. A story has a beginning, a middle, and an end. You don’t always have to go in that order, but we do expect those three components.
2. A story has a main character we think of as the hero or the heroine. You (your company or your product) are never the main character. The customer is always the hero.
3. A story contains at least one conflict or a challenge/problem for the main character to overcome. That is analogous to business pain (see Chapter 6).
4. A story usually has a villain. The villain may or may not be physically real (hacker, bug, downtime, outage, competition, regulations, lawyers, government) and frequently drives the pain.
5. A story contains a resolution or a fix to the conflict, often linked to your solution. That resolution is the “happy ever after” phase.
6. The story may also hold a moral as the heroine overcomes the challenge.

This outline looks amazingly like most movies, books, and TV shows. There is a formula that screenwriters and authors follow to build a compelling plot. We can follow the same process to harness your inner creativity. Pixar Inc., a subsidiary of Walt Disney Studios, has a multi-decade history of creating highly successful animated movies such as Toy Story, Cars, Monsters Inc. and Finding Nemo. Each has generated untold millions of revenues and kept the attention of millions of parents and children alike. It is a beloved and successful franchise. It uses a story

structure called the Pixar Seven-Step Story Spine when crafting the outline of any new project. Pixar animator Austin Madison creatively tells the storyⁱⁱⁱ of the story spine in an incredibly amusing YouTube training video. A general outline spine with some added detail is shown in Table 16.2.

Step	Phrasing	Detail
1	Once there was a ...	A hero/heroine with a goal.
2	Every day he/she ...	More about the hero/heroine (usually good things).
3	Until one day ...	They face a challenge or a conflict—the inciting incident.
4	Because of that ...	Critical for a longer story. A compelling narrative is not random scenes (features/products) but has a vital element that causes the next event.
5	Because of that ...	We are building up the pain or tension.
6	Until finally ...	The heroine overcomes the challenge. Good triumphs over evil.
7	Ever since then ...	Results and outcomes. The moral of the story.

Table 16.2 The Pixar Story Spine. Austin Madison Lead Animator.

Hint: Transitions Matter

Notice the use of “because of that..” as a transition phrase rather than “and then..” Because of that implies causality and a logical chain of events. “And then” is a common phrase uttered by an SE during a demo when they show a set of disconnected features.

One purpose of storytelling is to make the abstract more concrete, so Table 16.3 is an example you should recognize.

Step	Phrasing	Detail
1	Once there was a farm boy who wanted to be a pilot.	A hero/heroine with a goal.
2	Every day he helped out on the farm but always wanted and dreamed of more.	More about the hero/heroine (usually good things).
3	Until one day, his family was killed while he was out working in the fields.	They face a challenge or a conflict. The inciting incident.
4	Because of that, he left the farm and joined the legendary Jedi Knight Obi-Wan Kenobi.	Critical for a longer story. A compelling narrative is not random scenes (features/products) but has a vital element that causes the next event.
5	Because of that, he hires the smuggler Han Solo and his companion Wookie to take him to Alderaan.	Building up the pain or tension.
6	Finally, Luke reaches his goal, becomes a Starfighter pilot, and saves the day by blowing up the Death Star.	The heroine overcomes the challenge. Good triumphs over evil.

7	Ever since then, Luke has been on the path to becoming a Jedi Knight.	Results and outcomes. The moral of the story.
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Table 16.3 The Story Spine for Star Wars Episode 4.

There is a lot more to *Star Wars Episode 4 (A New Hope)*. However, way back in 1977, it did launch a massive franchise that continues to feature in popular culture throughout the world. First, there is the setup and start of the story, which all changes with the inciting incident (until one day..). That acts as the catalyst to propel the rest of the story. In the Wizard Of Oz, it is the tornado; in *The Hobbit*, Gandalf arrives at Bilbo Baggins door, and in the Indian Panchatantra, it is the treachery of the crocodile’s wife.

Hint: Apply The Spine To A Movie You Love

Before you apply this 7-step process to your technology portfolio, try it with a well-known book or movie. It’s a great team exercise to see how far you get into the steps before someone guesses your choice and completes the plot.

Fine Tuning The Story – Grammar and Numbers

The Seven-Step Spine is a wonderful way to construct an entire narrative for a story. Yet, a story does not always have to be a multiple sentence structure and can be a few simple words. This is a situation to harness the immense power of language and make it work to your advantage.

The first way to accomplish this is by using **SAM – Similes, Analogies, and Metaphors**^{iv}. They provide a method to make the complex simple and to turn esoteric into an everyday occurrence. Table 16.4 illustrates some of those typical examples.

Figure Of Speech	Definition	Example
Simile	Usually uses “as” in a direct comparison	Sly as a fox <i>Blind as a bat</i> Stubborn as a mule. <i>Your explanation is as clear as mud</i>
Analogy	How two things are alike. Often uses “it’s like.”	Technology is like a steamroller. Either you are driving, or you are part of the road. <i>That’s as useful as rearranging the deckchairs on the Titanic.</i> Life is like a box of chocolates – you never know what you’re going to get.
Metaphor	An emotional comparison. Doesn’t always make logical sense.	He’s one icon short on his toolbar. <i>They arrived at the meeting with an army of lawyers.</i> You light up my life. <i>She broke my heart.</i>

Table 16.4 The Use Of Figures Of Speech.

Note that these devices are highly language and culturally dependent – so what works in one country does not necessarily work in others. There is a famous story of a Sales VP visiting Asia for a business review. He reminded the sales team to be in constant contact with their prospects and said, “*out of sight, out of mind.*” Unfortunately, that phrase was translated into “*invisible idiot!*”

Sports metaphors also do not play well across different countries. For example, American baseball or football idioms such as “*quarterback,*” “*call an audible,*” or “*in your wheelhouse*” are just as incomprehensible to most of the world as “*hit for six*” or “*on a sticky wicket*” to non-cricket playing nations.

CASE STUDY: A Visit To The Veterinarian

Sometimes a simple analogy can be the easiest way to form the beginnings of an explanation. For example, when our dog Yardley, a wonderful Golden Retriever, was getting on in years, we took her to the vet as she had mobility problems. The vet told us about a drug with a complicated name (like Penta-oxy-cyclo-metacarb) that might provide relief. She explained that it used an NSAID vector to attack chronic swelling and worked by inhibiting some inflammatory enzymes – although the canine metabolic system did not always tolerate it. My wife and I looked at each other as we were lost.

We said, “So, it’s basically doggy Advil?”

“Yes,” replied the vet.

“Why not say that so it’s easier for us to understand?”

The vet, a little shocked, said, “I thought I did!”

You get the point. Sometimes, the meaning comes across loud and clear by relating a complex topic to something a little more straightforward and better understood.

The second technique for fine-tuning the story involves **humanizing numbers**. If the average sales presentation contains 1.5 numbers per minute – how can you make the significant numbers stand out? The answer is to make them relevant and personal. Numbers have feelings too. All too often, we present a batch of numbers to support a point, but without context, it is challenging for 90% of us to internalize and truly comprehend the meaning of the number. This

context particularly applies to very large numbers, very small numbers, percentages, and multiples. For example, you might tell a busy world-traveling executive that you can speed up a process by a factor of 7x. Follow that with “*imagine if you could travel from London to Paris or Sydney to Singapore in about an hour – what difference would that make to your life?*” Now that 7x becomes concrete and real and is far more likely to be remembered.

You cannot humanize every number in a deck or a demo, so you need to be selective. You also need to be prepared to translate that number into something more meaningful and stickier.

CASE STUDY: That IS a lot of data!

“We had a statistic at the start of our standard deck which said that the amount of data the typical customer would need to handle would multiply by a factor of 35x over the next four years. It cited an impressive piece of analyst research, yet it always missed the mark with the customer and left them underwhelmed. We needed a way to humanize the 35-times number and make it painful. The next time I presented the deck, I pointed to a whiteboard mounted on the wall. ‘If that is the current amount of data you are handling, then it will be the size of a football field in four years. American or real football (it was a mixed audience) – it doesn’t matter. Whiteboard, football field. That’s a big change.’ We never made it to the next slide!”

A Special Case – The Conversational Customer Reference Story

Telling a brief story about how another customer solved a problem and succeeded with your products is a potent sales tool. Unfortunately, it is also a vastly underused tactic by SEs and greatly abused by marketing departments. Don’t think of this as the classic reference slide with a logo, a quote from a happy customer, and a short tag line. Instead, imagine you are sitting down with the prospective customer and having a cup of tea or coffee in an informal setting.

You will create a short story, 60 seconds at most in length (160 words in English) which sounds natural and unrehearsed following a shortened and modified Seven-Step Spine.

Situation (Hero)	Include the customer’s job title or industry
Critical Issue	The Challenge or Conflict (Pain) of the person/company
Reason	The business reasons for that company’s critical issue - biased towards your solution.
Vision	In the words of the customer, the capabilities they needed to solve

	the problem. “They told me they needed a way to..”
Resolution	We provided ...
Result / The Moral	Some specific measurements of success.

Table 16.5 – The Conversational Customer Reference Story Format

As the format of Table 16.5 as an example... *“The Chief Controller of GE Capital in Connecticut (US) had a problem. He couldn’t close his accounting books and cash balances fast enough at the end of the day. That often meant he had to guess where to send money. So last year, they paid \$6m in fines and overdraft fees. He approached us because of a previous business relationship and because IT said they could fix it by throwing \$10m of equipment at it. He said he needed to close out his books by 5.30 pm each day. So we provided him with a way to shrink the size of his production database and speed up the daily processing to close his books out at 5 pm. Because of that, he saved \$6m in fines, generated an added \$11m in interest, and optimized cash distribution across the GE affiliates. Everyone was happy!*

That is 143 words and takes just over 50 seconds to tell if you resist the temptation to editorialize or include product names. How could you use that story? Imagine an executive asking you, *“what kind of results should we expect?”* or *“have other finance departments used this technology?”* You gain credibility and reduce any perceived risk of moving forward with your proposal by telling the reference story. The higher up the corporate ladder you sell, the more often you can tell, and you don’t have to show (demo) an outcome.

CASE STUDY: A Final Story About Stories

As an SE Director at Business Objects in the early 2000s, I discovered some fantastic reference accounts, yet we rarely mentioned them in our sales motion. At the time, our massive number of references was an unused competitive advantage against competitors MicroStrategy and Cognos. As part of a quarterly MBO program, I asked each SE within the region to submit two personal reference stories using the 60-second format. One of my managers jokingly called the resultant collection of stories “Tales From The Book Of John.” We kept the stories as a regional SE asset, and our business continued to grow. One day I received a call from Jim Tolonen, our CFO. Jim had a problem in that his team was receiving poor reviews for their quarterly Wall Street earnings broadcasts, and he wanted to spice up the meetings by speaking about more customers. He had heard about our reference book and asked to “borrow” it for some anonymous stories. You can hardly refuse the CFO, so we sent him the book. After the next

quarterly earnings call, Jim’s analyst satisfaction score went up about a point, and he kindly sent a lovely gift to my entire team. Everyone is in sales—the power of story.

Summary

Do not be afraid of stories and actively use those stories in a sales situation. Stories are for everyone, not just sales and marketing people. Even in a pure speeds and feeds type conversation, a story can still make the overall concept and any specific numbers “sing.” They do, however, need practice so that they sound natural rather than something learned in a class or from a book. That is the personalization aspect of the story.

Take the seven-step spine structure and develop a set of product or feature stories that you can use to make your presentations and demonstrations more memorable, interesting, and compelling.

“Once there was a Sales Engineer who loved technology and loved solving technical problems. Every day he gave technical presentations and long custom demos but dreamed of doing more. Until one day, when he was out in the field, a salesperson told him to “get out of the weeds” and clearly explain how his technology could help his customers instead of talking about boring bits and bytes. Because of that, he decided to explain the portfolio in simple terms that non-techies could understand. Because of that, he built many stories and FABulous explanations. Until one day, he became one of the most popular, well-paid, and successful SE’s in the entire geography. (Ever since then, he has been on the path to becoming a Jedi Knight).”

Skill Building

For the New SE:

1. Listen to the stories of the other SE's and experienced salespeople.
2. Repurpose those stories using the 7-step spine to make them your own.
3. Create your personal stories once you have some initial wins.

For the Experienced SE or SE Manager:

1. Develop a human explanation of all the important numbers in your presentation.
2. Build a set of conversational customer reference stories.
3. Look for complicated and complex concepts – apply SAM (Similes, Analogies, and Metaphors).

ⁱ First noted by Jeremy Hsu, Scientific American August 2008. <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-secrets-of-storytelling/>

ⁱⁱ To make or repair (an object) in an improvised or inventive way, making use of whatever items are at hand. From both the MacGyver TV Show of the mid-80's and the current day,

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aLVi0hjNrig>

^{iv} You are certainly not being paid to be a grammar expert, so although academics may fight over the different analogical language devices, it doesn't matter how you label them – they all have their uses.

^v Also known as Motrin, Nufren or more generically Ibuprofen.