

An Entrepreneur's Story Can Be the Perfect Marketing Tool

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Tom Little (second from left) used stories to help welcome new employees to his construction business and build bonds with clients. Photo: Hanna Harvey

By
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Have you heard the one about the company with a really great story to tell?

You see them on company websites and commercials. Businesses, particularly small ones with limited marketing budgets, use stories about their company to grab the attention of consumers, lenders and investors. Whether the tales are about the founding of the firm or how it affects customers, stories can be a powerful tool, resonating more deeply than facts and figures or traditional product pitches.

“Emotions and motivations shape cognition, which is why good stories stay with us,” says Angela Randolph, assistant professor at Babson College. “One of the most effective ways to enhance learning is to invoke strong emotions. People are more likely to remember emotional information than nonemotional.”

But shaping a narrative to really grab and hold people’s attention involves a lot of subtleties. Here’s a look at some of those secrets.

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Effective business narratives tap into old archetypes of storytelling that go all the way back to the earliest tales of mythology. "Stories about founders and new innovations are often in the form of a myth and follow the hero's journey," says Dr. Randolph.

Like the heroes of classic tales, she says, the company founder is going about a normal life when they run into a problem that interrupts it. After this call to action, the founder undergoes trials that must be overcome—and along the way transforms into a leader and the idea turns into a product, service or revolutionary change. Then the founder returns to "normal" life as an entrepreneur with a product or service for society.

Founders should keep that structure in mind when coming up with their own narrative, she says, and then highlight important points.

"Strong emotions can be triggered during the hero's call to action. For example, if the product is the result of a family member being injured or dying, the strong, sad emotions associated with the tragedy are the strong call to action that pulls the audience in," she says. Also highlight "favorable characteristics that founder exhibited during the trial and/or the new characteristics that are the result of the trials."

Focus on images

Company founders should be sure to flesh out their narrative with memorable images. "Humans are hard wired as

visual creatures, which is a central component of oral storytelling,” says Hannah Harvey, a scholar and professional storyteller who tells tales and leads workshops at festivals, among other places. An audience will remember the images far longer than abstract goals or values.

That can mean using visual images to accompany a company story on a website, but also using evocative imagery within a narrative. Dr. Harvey uses examples from her grandfather, Tom Little, who built his construction business from a three-man operation to 1,100 employees and used stories to welcome hires at employee orientations and forge relationships with clients at his construction business.

His stories were simple but powerful, Dr. Harvey says. “In the early years, picking up two employees in his battered truck in the dark on the way to work each morning, after drinking steaming hot coffee at his kitchen table before his two little girls woke up. Meeting workers at the gate each morning, whether it was raining or snowing. These images were entwined in his telling of his company’s story—and the images stick with you: the nip of a cold morning on your skin, steam from the coffee, a waving hand as you drove through the gate,” she says. “The values of early hours, hard work, leadership that labors alongside you—these values sound great, but...I could list the best-sounding values in the world and you won’t remember them five minutes after I stop talking. But you’ll remember how that cold air felt on your skin, and the coffee, and the image of the man at the gate. And the images will lead you back to the values.”

So, founders should think about what strong images they have that will connect with potential customers. “You already have them in your head,” Dr. Harvey says. “Where were you when you first got the idea for your company? Who was your first employee? What were the textures in that room, the weather outside, an object that was central to the experience of that day?”

Keep things tense

The best stories also take advantage of how the brain works. We are programmed to respond to stories that build empathy for the main character, says Mary Gale, a Babson College lecturer, citing research by Paul Zak of Claremont Graduate University. “character-driven stories do consistently cause oxytocin synthesis. Further, the amount of oxytocin released by the brain predicted how much people were willing to help others, for example, donating money to a charity associated with the narrative.”

In additional research, Dr. Zak showed that a story that sustains tension and thus engages the brain longer increases the probability that listeners will “come to share the emotions of the characters in it and are more likely to continue mimicking the feelings and behaviors of those characters.”

Previously in Small Business

“This research suggests benefits for an entrepreneur who develops and delivers a great, character-based story. Perhaps the listener becomes motivated to tell others about the presenter’s products or services. A great Kickstarter story may generate more donations. A potential investor who heard and was enchanted by a venture’s compelling character story may recommend that his partners take a deeper look at the company,” says Ms. Gale.

Along with tension, Dr. Zak says, the brain responds to stories with relatable characters. They “result in a better understanding of the key points a speaker wishes to make and enable better recall of these points,” he says.

Dr. Zak cites a commercial for Guinness beer that features a bar with an empty chair. It “initially draws us into a mystery: Why is the chair empty? It deepens the mystery when the chair remains empty and the barmaid does not allow the empty chair to be moved. This builds tension that we can see neurologically,” he says.

Because the mystery is about a person—the unknown patron who will sit in the empty chair—“it has a social component that we find builds emotional connection—oxytocin release—as the story continues,” Dr. Zak says. The

tension is released when we finally learn that the chair is for a soldier, whom the crowd salutes when he arrives.

Dr. Zak adds that it's important to take advantage of the effect a story has created by including an explicit call to action at the end, like buying a product or calling for more information. "Otherwise you lose the ability to influence the viewer," he says.

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