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BONDS

You've Told That Story 100 Times. Please Stop.

Storytelling is supposed to be a bonding experience. But when we keep telling the same story without acknowledging the repetition, our listeners turn off. Here's how to be a better storyteller.



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By
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I was talking recently with my mom when our conversation reminded me of a funny story. “This is hilarious,” I said. “One time I was driving with my friend Rudy...”

My mom cut me off impatiently.

“I’ve heard this one before, honey,” she said. “You don’t need to tell it again.”

Storytelling is supposed to be a bonding experience. When we share our personal narratives, we disclose something about our values, our history, our outlook on life. The self-disclosure builds closeness and is a signal of faith in the relationship.

But the bonding benefits of storytelling only work if you’re good at it. Many of us, even those who tell stories for a living, are not. We repeat stories we’ve told before. We tell tales that don’t

have a point. We fail to pay attention to our audience, choosing stories that are inappropriate or ignoring clues that our listener is bored, annoyed or confused. And we don't know how to edit ourselves, throwing in every detail we find fascinating, no matter how irrelevant.

"People can't become engaged with a story that is incoherent," says Melanie Green, a professor of communication at the University at Buffalo, who has been studying storytelling for 20 years. "They're too busy trying to figure out what is going on."

Dr. Green's new research, which is yet to be published, shows that people who tell stories—as opposed to just delivering facts or opinion—are judged by others to be more warm and likable. And her previous research has shown that women find men who are good storytellers to be more attractive and desirable as long-term partners, most likely because storytelling shows a man knows how to connect, to share emotions and, maybe, to be vulnerable.

But 10 new studies by researchers at Washington University in St. Louis and the University of Georgia found that people who repeat the same stories over and over are viewed as less sincere and less authentic. In other words, they're seen as not presenting their true self to the listener. The research also found that listeners are less interested in engaging with someone retelling a story they've heard him or her tell before.

The researchers conducted the studies in a variety of ways: Some participants were asked to read written scenarios of people telling stories, such as politicians giving a speech, business people making a pitch or tour guides leading excursions in Berlin or London. Others watched videos of a comedian delivering a routine. In each experiment, half the participants were shown a version where the person told their story or joke just once; the other half received a scenario where the person repeated the story or joke. Most of the time, the participants found the person who repeated their story to be less likable.

Yet there was an important exception: When the storytellers in the experiment acknowledged their repetition—when they prefaced their retold story or joke with a phrase such as: "Now for a tale I like to tell" or "As I always say"—they were given a pass by listeners. They were viewed as just as authentic as those who did not repeat their stories.

What's going on here? We all have our favorite stories, ones that have gotten a good reaction for us in the past and that we feel illustrate something about us. Yet we also expect our social interactions to be unique. When someone violates this expectation by repeating a story without acknowledging it, we view them as falsely presenting themselves. "It's like a lie of omission," says Rachel Gershon, who did the research as a doctoral student at Washington University and is the lead author on the study.

Scientists now know that a well-told story boosts the release of two key neurochemicals in the brain: dopamine, which focuses our attention, and oxytocin, which helps us bond. This produces a state called immersion, in which a listener is both absorbed by a story and willing to be persuaded, says Paul Zak, a neuroeconomist and professor of economic sciences, psychology and management at Claremont Graduate University, in Claremont, Calif., who studies the

neurobiology of storytelling. To get listeners to enter a state of immersion, the storyteller needs them to pay attention and to become emotionally engaged in the outcome of the story. This emotional engagement is what increases the listener's attachment to the storyteller.

Dr. Zak, who is also the CEO of Immersion Neuroscience, a technology company that measures the neurological changes of people going through immersive experiences, such as listening to stories or watching movies, says his research has found that all compelling plots share certain elements. They have an exciting start—"It has to be a James Bond opening, some reason for me to want to listen to the story and become absorbed by it," Dr. Zak says—and then build both emotion and tension quickly. They have characters that are interesting and likable enough that people care about them. And they have action and a satisfying resolution to the tension.

Good storytellers use their voice to convey emotion, passion, drama—all cues that show they really care about the story. Emotional stories—ones that make people laugh or feel moved, touched, angry or outraged—have the most impact, says the University at Buffalo's Dr. Green. "If it sparks an emotion in you, there's a good chance it will spark an emotion in your audience," she says.

I've learned a lot about storytelling in my career as a journalist (and from my mother). Tailor your story to your audience. Have a point. Edit yourself; shorter is much better than long. Kill your darlings (those details you love but that are irrelevant and, therefore, distracting). Leave a straight wake—no rambling or going off on a tangent. Don't repeat yourself. (Thanks, Mom.)

But if you do repeat yourself, it will help if the story is funny—and you are self-deprecating. You will also need to be sure to own up to your repetition. Like this:

Here's a story that always makes me smile, so I tell it probably way too much: One time I was driving with my friend Rudy and we passed a big yellow building with a sign that said "Gold Rush." I had recently decided I needed to replace the gold chain I wear with a locket that was once my grandmother's. So I mentioned to Rudy that I was going to stop in at Gold Rush sometime soon and see what they have in stock.

Rudy shook his head, chuckled, and then broke into a huge grin. "I'd love to see that," he said.

Baffled, and a little hurt, I asked why.

"Because Gold Rush isn't a jewelry store," he replied. "It's a strip club."

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HOW TO BE A BETTER STORYTELLER

Here is some advice from the experts.

Have a point. There should be a reason you are telling this story. You don't have to state it out loud, but you do need to keep it in mind. And the details of the story should convey it.

Open hot. Paul Zak, a neuroeconomist and professor at Claremont Graduate University, in Claremont, Calif., who studies the neurobiology of storytelling, says you need a "James Bond opening." "It has got to have some reason for me to want to listen to the story and become absorbed by it," he says. An exciting lead-in produces dopamine in the listener's brain, which helps to focus his or her attention

Flesh out your characters. The reader needs emotional cues. How were you feeling? What are the other people in your story like and how did they act or feel? When a listener cares about your characters, his or her brain produces oxytocin, the bonding hormone, Dr. Zak says.

Build tension. Deepen the story. Create a cliffhanger. This gives the listener a reason to care about your characters and engage with your story. And when your listener is emotionally engaged, he or she will bond better with you.

Don't exaggerate. It kills your credibility.

Disclose something about yourself. Research shows that self-disclosure helps people bond. But remember it's a balancing act. Oversharing can be a turnoff. So share appropriately.

If you're telling a story you've told before, own up to it. New research shows that people who repeat stories are viewed as less genuine or authentic—unless they acknowledge their repetition.

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