

What's So Powerful About Storytelling?

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Story is the Human Advantage

Storytelling is what unites us as humans. It connects us to one another, and it distinguishes our species from other species. Historian Yuval Noah Harari wrote in *Sapiens* of how story itself contributes to our species' competitive advantage. Our capacity to tell stories enabled us to modify behavior and evolve more successfully than did our peers in the animal kingdom.

Through storytelling, we could collaborate, persuade, lead, and follow. Storytelling put the power into the collective, instead of into a single individual or family. This enabled us to cross barriers of time and geographical distance. We could band together to hunt big game more effectively. We could migrate in groups large enough to survive and colonize new continents that previously knew no humans. Our instinct to tell and be moved by stories enabled us to thrive despite inferior physical strength and brain size.

Harari illustrates that storytelling resulted in previously unseen large-scale cooperation between large numbers of strangers, and that cooperation included trade, group hunting and migration. "No animal other than *Sapiens* engages in trade, and all the *Sapiens* trade networks about which we have detailed evidence were based on fictions," Harari writes. With stories, "*Sapiens* can cooperate in extremely flexible ways with countless numbers of strangers. That's why *Sapiens* rule the world."

Story facilitated cooperation through trade, and this is what businesses still utilize today. Trade is possible because of cooperation. Cooperation is possible because of storytelling. This is the heart of brand storytelling. The promise of your business is the story of why a person should trade with you. It's the reason you are allowed to ask them for this trade.

Use Story to Command Attention with Tension

A major challenge of business is capturing the attention of an audience whose mental bandwidth is scarce and getting scarcer. This challenge mounts exponentially as more and more stimuli compete for that same mental bandwidth. The Internet and social media escalate this stimuli, and consequently deplete our attention bandwidth.

Herein lies the power of a deliberate brand strategy, which uses a central principle of story—tension—to capture and sustain the prized attention of our audience.

Stories relate a tension followed by a resolution. Loss followed by victory. Suffering followed by salvation. This pattern is a hallmark of the human condition. We continually encounter obstacles, overcome those obstacles, and then confront a new one. It is our Hero's Journey, our *Odyssey*.

Tension is what sustains people's attention as they listen to story. We recognize ourselves in the character. We recognize our problems in theirs. So when a storyteller or a business leader sets up a character facing a tension, the audience cannot help but listen and be captivated. They, too, yearn to experience the resolution. And that satisfying resolution comes in the form of a redeeming event or person or epiphany or product.

Here are some famous story tensions and resolutions:

1. Homer's *Iliad* is a story of the war between the Greeks and the Trojans of Troy. The Greeks needed to infiltrate Troy to fight their enemy, but the walls around this enemy kingdom blocked their attempts (tension). The Greek army secretly built a giant hollow wooden horse and filled it with hiding Greek warriors. When the rest of the Greek army sailed away, the Trojans interpreted this showy exodus as an admission of defeat. Believing the wooden horse a gift, they brought it inside Troy's walls. That night, the hidden Greeks emerged from the horse and opened the kingdom gates to let in their comrades who had surreptitiously returned to shore. The Greeks fought the Trojans inside Troy and won the war (resolution).

2. When Harry Potter came face-to-face with Voldemort in the final book of J. K. Rowling's series, he realized with despair that since a part of him was inside Voldemort, defeating Voldemort would lead to his own death too (tension). Harry took an inward journey and uncovered a love that enabled him to save his world and, in the process, his own life (resolution).

3. In the 1980's film *Can't Buy Me Love*, high school student Ronald Miller wants to shed his nerdy image and be cool. But in the process, he banishes his true friends, disgusts his girlfriend, and loses his own true nature (tension). At the movie's climax, Ronald stops a fight among his friends and recounts a story to remind them of their close friendship. As a result, Ronald regains his friends and girlfriend, as well as the respect of the cool kids (resolution).

Your business resolves a tension for your customer. The story frames this tension as conflict that the customer (protagonist) is trying to resolve. This resolution is why your business deserves to exist. By communicating that tension and your uncommon way to resolve it, your business will attract customers who need that problem solved. For example:

1. My mother wants to read a book, but her aging eyes feel fatigue after ten minutes of reading (tension). Audible lets her enjoy those books by listening to them rather than reading them (resolution).

2. Your colleague wants to participate in a meeting across the country, but it will take too much time and money to travel (tension). Zoom lets her participate without having to spend the time and money traveling to the distant meeting (resolution).

3. Our team likes to collaborate and brainstorm at a whiteboard. But the constant erasing and rewriting as ideas are reconsidered, recatalogued and recontextualized impedes the creative flow (tension). 3M Post-its encourage collaboration through the easily rearrangeable medium of sticky notes. They liberate us to move concepts around at will, unleashing the creative flow we had missed (resolution).

As you build your business, remain focused on the tension you're offering to resolve for your customers. While developing your offering, while delivering on your promise, and while messaging to customers, keep central on your mind the nature of the problem your customer is experiencing. This will set you up to resolve that tension in a way that satisfies and delights your customer.

Use Story to Persuade

Stories persuade. As Harari wrote, the persuasive power of stories distinguished homo sapiens in the animal kingdom. "Much of history," he said, "revolves around this question: How does one persuade millions of people to believe particular stories about gods, or nations, or limited liability companies? Yet when it succeeds, it gives sapiens immense power, because it enables millions of strangers to cooperate and work toward common goals." Whether it was joining forces to fend off a predator or to sail across oceans, the early sapiens persuaded and flourished by telling stories.

We modern sapiens still persuade through storytelling. Stories succeed because they work in concert with the neural wiring of our audience. Facts and claims engage the prefrontal cortex, inviting debate and pushback. Stories circumvent that newer, slower, critical brain. They create an express lane to the brain stem, enabling you to persuade before their prefrontal cortex wakes to the conversation. It enables your Dorothy to skip the judgmental gatekeepers at the entrance to Oz and speak directly with the sympathetic Wizard himself.

There may even be a chemical basis for the persuasive power of story. Author, professor, and TED Talk celebrity Dr. Paul Zak has discovered that storytelling encourages oxytocin release which increases likelihood that listeners will trust the storyteller. You tell me a story, I relate to the tension that the character in your story faces, which releases oxytocin in my brain, which makes me like and trust you, the storyteller, more for having told me a story. You are now in a good place to persuade me.

Persuasion is the fundamental challenge of marketing. And storytelling is a powerful tool as you approach this challenge. When you tell stories, your customer is more likely to trust you, and to feel they can safely believe your promise. So use storytelling to set these conditions

so that you succeed in persuading your target customer.