

The Power of Story





The Science of the Sticky Story

Did you know that the man who produced the original Coca-Cola, first carried a jug of it down the street to his local pharmacy, where it was sold as medicine for five cents a glass? Or that J Willard Marriott founded the Marriott hotel chain on the profits of one root beer stand. These one-line ‘garage-to-greatness’¹ or ‘rags-to-riches’ tales are sticky. They have an implicit arc that, once heard or read, we absorb them into our brain as stories and are unlikely to forget.

Story is part of human hardwiring, right there with the need to eat, drink and sleep. It’s a powerful, but often under-appreciated tool that enables us to remember, communicate, and persuade.

We know this because the potency of story has been scientifically measured. Listening to stories can ‘infect’ the way people think, through a process called *neural entrainment*.² Studies show that when a group of people listen to the same story, their brain activity is remarkably similar. Not only that, but when they recount that same story to others, the new audience also has the same neurological response. So, our brains can become aligned when we hear the same story. This is the essence of how we communicate and share memories and knowledge in communities.

In a Data-driven World – Why Story?

When the importance of data is heralded as the be-all end-all, why story? Data is crucial – but we tend to not remember ‘story-less’ information and find hard to relate to it without context. Some say that it is a difference between engaging the head and heart – once our emotions are involved, we pay attention. Neurologist, Antonio Damasio³, believes that ‘a brain that can’t feel can’t make up its mind.’ Science tells us that that when we read or hear a story our brain activates in seven areas. In contrast, when we process facts or figures, we only activate the language area.⁴

Canadian author, Douglas Coupland describes storytelling as

“a creative act of pattern recognition. Through characters, plot and setting, a writer creates places where previously invisible truths become visible. Or the storyteller posits a series of dots that the reader can connect.”⁵

As we move through the world, the human brain interprets and files enormous amount of data, connecting these data-points to construct our sense of reality. Not all this data is consciously available all the time, but from the deep architecture of our mind we can retrieve enough *patterned information* to enable us to think and act. These patterns of information are what we know as stories, and we create them constantly in order to function.

When it comes to using data – we need to contextualise and give it meaning for people. If we want to data to influence behaviour and decisions, we need to tell the story.

Leaders as Storytellers

As leaders we can leverage this instinctive way of communicating to share visions, align our teams, and build strong partnerships. Stories can shape how people see us, and they afford us the tools to persuade others or move them to act.

By its very nature, a story is an invitation to suspend our beliefs and step into another viewpoint. It's in that space that mindsets shift, and real change can occur.⁶ Stories can pierce the veil of our biases, doubts and scepticism. Stories are a way for leaders to communicate truths that inspire and influence.

The pay-off for great storytelling can be enormous but requires that we meet two key conditions. We must be **authentic**, and the story must be **relevant**. Storytelling invites an implicit contract with our audience. In business, if our use of a story is incongruent with who we seem to be, and is not applicable to our listeners, then we are breaking our unspoken agreement with them, and our attempt to influence will literally, fall on deaf ears.

There are countless examples of how leaders effectively use storytelling, but Brian Chesky is particularly notable at the launch⁶ of Airbnb's **TRIPS function in 2016**. When viewing the clip, we can see that not only does Chesky weave his personal life story into the vision for his company, but he then demonstrates the 'human-ness' of his product by linking it to a story around young Chilean man finding his way in San Francisco.

“Great stories happen to those who can tell them.”

- Ira Glass

How to Craft a Story for the Telling?

Memorable stories – written or spoken – don't always come out perfectly formed. They need to be considered, crafted, and practised to trigger empathy⁷. Columbia Business School⁸ uses the **VOTES model** as a shortcut to remember key story elements.

VOTES Model



Vulnerability – show our humanity



Obstacles – overcoming hurdles creates tension in a story



Telling (the right amount of details) – carries meaning and emotional weight



Effort – ‘nothing worth having is lightly won’



Suspense – time the big reveal, the turning point, the transformation for the right moment

It's helpful for leaders to have a couple of practised stories ready to share as shortcuts to key messages. They might be our company's origin story, or a story that conveys our company culture, our purpose or values.

And don't think you can only use that story once. Research shows that people are happy to hear the same tale again and again if it hits right. It's all in the telling.

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