

How to tell a business story people will read

By John Fries

It's no secret that one of the most powerful tools in your marketing toolbox right now is the story. Stories are awesome because they're anecdotal. They take messages from the theoretical to the practical, which means that they deliver information in a structured way—beginning, middle, end. We're all familiar with this structure, which has been around for centuries, so we're hard-wired to relate to it and remember it. You probably heard your first story as a toddler when your mother read to you. A few years later, sitting around the campfire, you heard stories about the hook and the couple parked on lover's lane.

It's not in our nature to remember facts, figures, statistics, and lists of instructions. Remember drilling yourself to remember facts right before midterms or finals time, only to forget them after you dropped your blue booklet on the table and headed for summer vacation?

But stories are powerful and memorable, and they can provoke action or response. This is why they're used so liberally on commercials and in direct response marketing.

Advertisement for 'Pick Your Instrument' featuring an illustration of a classroom and a text story titled 'They Laughed When I Sat Down At the Piano But When I Started to Play!'. The text describes a student's journey from being laughed at to becoming a professional pianist.

The ad at left, which was written in 1926 by the legendary copywriter John Caples, is one of the most successful and most emulated ads of all time. It's a story.

A story at its core is very simple. Someone wants something, maybe a solution to a problem, and he or she tries to get it. The challenge is in how to get it.

In business, this could be a person or a company trying to create new efficiencies, save money or find a better way of doing something—like Edison did with the light bulb or Bell did with the phone. Once the quest for the solution has been completed, the story ends with how the struggle to get from point A to point B has made life better for the person, the company or the marketplace.

As a business owner, you solve problems and alleviate pain for your customers every day. This means that you potentially have lots of stories to tell about how you made their lives better. They came to you with a problem and

you provided a solution. Now, they have nice things to say about you, your expertise, your insights, your ability to help them.

The story of how you helped them, infused with their comments, is now a powerful sales and marketing tool for you. They can be used as ads, case studies, blog posts, social media messages, video clips on your website, newsletter articles, and in other forms. It tells other potential customers how you can help them, too.

The key is writing these stories in a way that's engaging. Not just listing a bunch of dry facts, but communicating the beginning-middle-end in a way that intrigues and fascinates the reader.

In Caples' music school ad, he used a powerful headline that not only told you that it's a story but made you want to know more. He set the events in a real-life environment to which we can all relate. He showed how action created an outcome. He used human emotion to make his point. And he provided a happy ending.

And those nice comments? We call them testimonials. They're third-party endorsements of your expertise. When customers say them, they carry weight.

So, to recap, story structure in the sales and marketing environment can be broken down into:

1. Customer problem
2. His/her struggle to solve it
3. How our company helped them solve it
4. How the experience made the customer's life better (accompanied by favorable comments)

John Fries is a Pittsburgh-based marketing, PR and branding veteran, writer, author, media producer, and designer who has built and led communications teams at several prominent organizations and worked with dozens of clients to help them communicate with more impact and get results. His website is at www.johnfries.com.

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