





he ancient art of storytelling—or corporate narrative to the business set—is the hottest form of marketing since the Web site. CEOs from Fortune 500 companies and tiny start-ups alike employ “mythopoetic leadership” techniques to create corporate cultures and convey big concepts that create a higher level of engagement internally and with consumers.

“If you’re in the business of communicating ideas—whether to customers, employees or any key audience—storytelling is the single most important tool at your disposal,” says Michael Margolis, president of THIRSTY-FISH, a boutique story and strategy consultancy in New York and contributor to *Wake Me Up When the Data is Over: How Organizations Use Stories to Drive Results*. “The human brain is hardwired to learn new information and make connections through stories. Contrast this with the presiding corporate culture of communications: jargon, statistics and PowerPoint presentations. In an age of information overload and attention deficit, stories can help cut through the noise.”

WHY IT WORKS

“Stories are our most effective, accessible, adaptable and economical way to share information,” explains Catherine Conant, a professional storyteller in Middletown, Conn., who works as a consultant to develop narratives. “Information shared in a narrative form has a better chance of being remembered longer,

shared more often and adapted more creatively than any other type of information.”

Wayne Sensor, CEO of Alegent Health in Omaha, agrees. “Stories are captivating communication tools that serve several purposes: They celebrate the right behaviors, serve as role models and encourage people,” he says. “A well-told story can fire up employees, tug at heart strings and illustrate a message like nothing else can.”

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REINFORCING CULTURE AND MISSION

According to Sensor, narrative is the most powerful technique for communicating a mission and vision within a company. “In any organization where the fabric of the culture is critical, you simply must consider storytelling as a tool,” he says. “It demonstrates in a very real way who the organization is and what it stands for. It illustrates expectations and positions you as a leader who is living the mission and valuing the culture. And it allows you to lead by example—even those employees you may never meet personally.”

For example, Sensor opened a recent meeting with a story about a colleague who exhibited compassion and integrity in a difficult situation, which is an ongoing goal and challenge in the healthcare field.

“I used the story to encourage those in the room to think about the decision points they



Spinning the Yarn

"Storytelling is an essential tool to activate and accentuate your efforts, whether they are related to business development, sales, marketing or internal change," says Michael Margolis, president of THIRSTY-FISH, a boutique story and strategy consultancy in New York. According to him, there are three types of stories every organization should cultivate.



FOUNDING STORY

A parable that describes the roots and history of the company can become a great source of pride for employees, as well as a marker of credibility to customers. This story can help anchor and reinforce a set of ideals or beliefs at the heart of the business. This story can be promoted on your Web site, in sales materials, in the annual report and through dozens of other outlets.

VALUES STORIES

These short vignettes describe a situation and how an employee handled the situation. Famous corporate cultures such as Nordstrom and Marriott were built upon extensive catalogs of stories that reinforced the right attitude, thinking and behavior from employees. These tales can be used to train workers, build a vibrant culture and even guide strategic decisions.

CUSTOMER STORIES

You'd be amazed at what you learn when you listen to the customers' stories. They may value your product or service for a totally different reason than you thought. These stories are your greatest sources of learning, and they can be used as testimonials when you market to consumers. The most forward-thinking corporations today invest a lot of money listening to customer stories.

cross every day," he says. "It resonated with them because the story was about a peer.... The people in the group were clearly moved—you could see them thinking about what decisions they would have made if they were in the same position. The great thing about storytelling is that the same story you use to generate great thought can also encourage, empower and excite."

TURNING AROUND A COMPANY

At Electronic Data Systems, a global technology services and business solutions company, storytelling became a key component in internal communications in 2005.

"Emerging from a turnaround, EDS leadership wanted to reach out and engage employees in a compelling way that recognized their contributions to our clients, the business and each other," says Springfield Lewis, who headed global internal communications and is now director of communications for EDS Americas in Plano, Texas.

EDS worked with a storytelling firm to create a narrative introducing corporate initiatives.

"By creating a chapter-by-chapter story, employees could see exactly where their contributions fit in and benefited the business," Lewis says. "And talking about our clients' success—aided by EDS employees—ultimately reflects our success, and that story is evergreen."

SUPPORTING DEVELOPMENT AND SALES

For Burt Hill—a Pennsylvania-based architecture and design firm with offices all over the world—narrative helps attract new clients and employees. The firm realized its real value lies in the impact design

has on the people that occupy the buildings and environments it creates, so it began using storytelling to convey that.

"We determined the best way to communicate what it means to work with or at our firm is to tell the stories of those people [who do]," says J. Rossi, the firm's chief marketing officer. "The impact our work has on their lives is what really drives our team to do their best every day."

Burt Hill created a composite character, Laura, to promote its student-centered projects. "She's a student who will be using the facility," Rossi says. "We explain our work process and the results through her."

In addition to using narratives in presentations to clients, Burt Hill deploys them in internal communications, direct mail, trade show materials and on its Web site. The result? "It has significantly helped our ability to connect with our target audience and showed that we understand their needs," Rossi says.

GET STARTED

If you think storytelling's for you and your company, it's fairly easy to get going. "Prepare yourself like you would with any other business activity; Practice telling the story until it feels natural, and then give it a try and watch what happens," Sensor says.

When you speak to people about where their values intersect the organization's culture, you will find that you are speaking to their hearts. It's at that moment that you can be assured your employees or audiences are listening, engaging and being moved to greatness. ■

