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BULLETIN

Timeless Tips for Telling Stories

by Lori L. Silverman

Staff meetings. Project presentations. Company events. Industry

conferences. Community gatherings. Training sessions. The list of places

to tell stories is as endless as your imagination. Do you need to be a great

storyteller to effectively use stories? Absolutely not. However, you can

heighten success by preparing how you will communicate your stories and

taking into account some tips when you're actually sharing them.

Selecting a story

We all tell stories in casual conversations. They often spill out without any

pre-planning. While spontaneity is the norm in these settings, selecting

the best stories to use in more formal venues requires forethought. Here

are five criteria for selecting stories:

- **Who** will hear your story/stories? Ensure the story and its wording
  are appropriate for those who'll hear it. The last thing you want is
  to inadvertently offend someone. Stay away from painful or
  embarrassing stories or those that speak to life or death
  challenges until you've established rapport and credibility.

- **What** objective are you trying to achieve? This doesn't mean the
  story needs to strictly fit the topic; a metaphorical or symbolic
  story can be just as powerful.

Discuss this article

Related Resources:

- **Happy Tales: The CEO as storyteller:**
  CEOs can motivate employees by telling good
  stories.

- **Spin Straw Into Gold with Good Storytelling:**
  Interested in getting paid for telling your own
  stories? Here are some tips to consider before
  launching your own storytelling business.

- **Healing Voice:**
  One storyteller shows health practitioners a new
  way to communicate through telling stories.

- **Where** will you physically be telling the story? If the story is meant only for a certain audience, learn about the location where you'll be delivering it. Not all building walls are soundproof. Stories like to travel!

- **When** will you tell a story, in relation to other information that you'll share? Here are some rules of thumb: If you know people will be tired or distracted, open with a story to capture their attention. If you suspect they may resist what you have to share, relay a story beforehand that helps them understand its importance. If you're unsure that they'll comprehend data you have to communicate, tell a story afterwards that brings meaning to it—or tell one early on that leads into the need for the findings. If you're skeptical that they'll do what's been asked of them, end with a story that speaks to the need to take action.

- **How** will you be perceived given the story/stories you share? Perception is everything. People will learn a lot about you even if you use stories that aren't your own. While personal stories are easier to tell because you've lived the experience, know that you may be labeled as self-centered and arrogant if you only share your own.

Now what?

You've selected the story or stories you want to tell. Now what do you do?

First, capture them. The easiest way to do this is to tape record and

transcribe them. This ensures you stay true to the spoken word.

Next, structure the story in a compelling manner (see "What Makes a

Story a Story?" in this issue). If you're using someone else's story,

include their name in it for attribution (if they give you permission to do

so).

Then practice it. Out loud. Over and over again before every time you

plan to tell it. Not in front of a mirror, but in an open room. It will help

you recall the story if your mind goes blank in the setting in which you

need to tell it. It's happened to me!

To depict various characters, face different parts of the room and alter

your voice. When speaking internal dialogue, look away from those to

whom you're telling the story. Experiment with various body movements,

facial expressions, gestures, pacing and vocal intonations to capture the

flow and meaning of the story's content. Tweak the story if certain words

don't sound quite right. Gather the courage to have someone hear your

rendition of the story and provide you with feedback.

It's time!

How do you lead into a story when you actually have to tell it? Try

phrases like, "This data reminds me of a time when..." "This situation is especially meaningful," and, "Tell me whether you identify with this scenario." Avoid the phrase "Let me tell you a story...." It will minimize the impact of what follows, especially with those who view stories as too sentimental.

It may be beneficial to pause for a few moments after telling a story to let its message sink in and for people to derive meaning from it. With highly emotional stories, it's OK for this pause to last up to a minute or two. Use the time to take a long drink of water and reorient yourself!

If you tell a story that has an element of controversy, be prepared for immediate reactions from those who hear it. They'll want to share how they feel or relay a story of their own. In fact, most times that you tell a story, listeners will have comments to share afterward. Build in time for this conversation.

Telling stories will enhance your messages. And connect you more closely with those who hear them. You'll increase your chance of success when you take time to prepare yourself and think through the impact the story will have when you actually tell it.

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