# When Do I Get to Tell Stories as a Sales Professional?

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Success stories aren't the only stories that work well in the sales process. If you want to increase revenues, include stories from prospective buyers, individual sales professionals and their respective companies in each step:

Step 1: Prepare to sell (primarily a research step)

Step 2: Prospecting (identifying and finding new prospects)

Step 3: Calling on a prospect (identifying needs and requirements; building the relationship)

Step 4: Calling on a potential client (a sale is now possible: demonstrations, RFP/RFQ responses, handling objections)

Step 5: Close the sale (short list presentations, budget negotiations, performance standards)

Step 6: After the sale

Your main challenge is helping sales staff personnel identify which stories they need to tell and at what process step they're most applicable.

**Do Your Homework**

Arm sales professionals with "official" stories about the prospect's organization before they ever call on prospective buyers. Examples include: its founding story (e.g. Henry Ford and the Model T), folklore stores (e.g., the return of tires to Nordstrom), current news stories and stories from annual reports.

Also help them identify stories about a prospect's industry. For example, if your company sells offerings in the financial sector, it's important to know the stories that distinguish credit unions from banks. Also push sales staff to capture stories about your competitors and the current state of the industry so they understand how the marketplace is affecting the prospect's business.

These stories serve two purposes. First, they help educate sales staff. More importantly, when told to a prospect, they demonstrate that your firm's sales personnel have done their homework.

**Stories Obtained Through Story Prompts**

Get your sales staff to recognize that stories evoked from potential buyers (see "Whose Stories Really Matter in Prospecting?" in the July issue of *Creative Training Techniques*—subscription required) have a purpose far beyond informing your company about specific needs and pain points. Show them how to incorporate these prospect stories into their RFP/RFQ responses and into general presentations and short list interviews. Keep in mind that staff cannot use these stories with other prospects or clients without express permission.

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**Personal Stories Create Personal Connections**

The judicial use of sales professionals' personal stories can help establish trust and common ground with potential buyers. However, these stories aren't effective when pulled out of their hip pocket without any prior thought. Help your sales staff not only identify these personal stories but how to tell them in a consistent and compelling manner:

1. How they landed in the industry
2. How they came to be hired by your firm and their work ethics
3. Shared hobbies and interests
4. Children and family events and activities
5. Their experiences with the prospect's company
6. Similar challenges that they have faced
7. What the sales person has learned from working with other organizations
8. "I've been in your shoes" stories

Then, aid the sales staff in identifying when to specifically use them with a prospect. As a general rule of thumb:

1. During Steps 2, 3 and 4, share personal stories as the means to establish rapport and demonstrate depth of experience (a, b, c, e and h stories are applicable here).
2. Tell personal stories to overcome objections in Steps 4 and 5 (f, g and h stories are useful here, especially if they relate directly to the offering the sales professional is trying to sell, e.g., a specific financial service or insurance).
3. Post-sale, communicate personal stories as a means of growing a mutually beneficial relationship (c, d, f, and g stories have a home here).

In addition, show them how their personal stories can replace story prompts in Steps 2 and 3 to trigger a specific story topic that will help them learn more about the prospect and his/her organization. For example, having a sales professional tell a "safe" story of a personal calamity (e.g., golf ball broke large picture window) can help trigger a tough times story in a prospect, thus providing more in-depth information about what's happening in this person's life or organization. Demonstrate why they may not need to fully tell this story before it sparks a response from the prospective buyer.

**Organizational Stories Distinguish Your Firm from the Pack**

Your role is to get every sales professional in your organization to accurately articulate the stories that define:

- Your firm's value proposition and its unique competitive advantage
- The organization's core values
- The birth of your organization
- Successes your firm has achieved with clients and in your industry
- Failures and recovery experiences

These stories aren't one-liners, as written in your new employee handbook or marketing materials; they are full-blown narratives that demonstrate these points. If these stories don't exist, you'll need to work with others to find and craft them so their messaging is consistent.

**Putting It to Work**

Use weekly sales meetings to gather and share these types of stories—and the successes obtained by using them. Take time to collect and document them, so they can continue to be leveraged throughout the sales process for years to come.

*© 2010 Lori L. Silverman and Karen Dietz for* Creative Training Techniques. *Silverman is a strategist and keynote speaker. Check out her books,* Stories Trainers Tell *and* Wake Me Up When the Data Is Over: How Organizations Use Stories to Drive Results.

*Dietz specializes in turning leaders into compelling storytellers. Her company, Polaris Associates, provides story work consulting, tools, and coaching.*

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