



Once upon a time, a speech became a story...

by Lori Silverman

Sometimes a series of small decisions can profoundly impact our lives. How do I know? It happened to me.

For years I marketed my management consulting firm by writing articles and speaking free of charge. After my book "Critical SHIFT" was published, I decided on a whim to pursue paid work as a keynote speaker. How difficult could it be to memorize my talks? I quickly pitched the props. Fifty garbage bags filled with thousands of overhead slides waited on the curb for pick-up.

When my big break finally arrived, I was the opening keynote speaker for an 1,100-person conference in Seattle. The night before, I practiced my presentation with my friend Bill. Learning the talk by heart wasn't working. Bill cajoled me. "Use more examples. They'll help people discover important points without you listing them." I stopped cold.

Somehow I'd overlooked a lesson learned when I quit smoking: when you give up a behavior you must replace it with a better one. I'd tossed the overheads but neglected to add anecdotes. I stayed up all night reworking my presentation.

From the tagua nut buttons on our Hawaiian Shirts to the "soft-as-the-hair-of-an-angel" Peruvian cotton we use in Pima Polos, we're all about clothing with a story. So we were captivated by speaker, consultant, trainer, and author Lori Silverman, who in her book "Stories Trainers Tell: 55 Ready-to-Use Stories to Make Training Stick," inspires her audiences to take action.

Afterwards, I thought, "There's got to be an easier way." I Googled "painless keynote speaking" and up popped the National Speakers Association. What could it hurt to join and attend the annual conference? Five minutes into the conference, I was mesmerized. It struck me: Great speakers tell compelling stories. Stories that give you belly laughs. Stories that trigger teary eyes. In an hour they may only cover three or four key points – no brain overload happened here. So I simplified my talks, and queried colleagues for tales to tell. Praise followed.

I still felt something was missing, but chose to let life take its course. It soon brought the opportunity to co-author "Stories Trainers Tell." While interviewing trainers, storytellers, speakers, consultants, and business leaders for the book, I stumbled onto the answers. Powerful stories have an issue, problem, conflict or dilemma at their core. There are proven ways to structure stories to heighten recall. Using acting techniques when telling them can captivate people's attention. Through the National Storytelling Association, I saw how stories could increase productivity and enhance strategic communications. Today, not only am I a better speaker, I'm a better consultant.

What about you? Do you long to be heard? To add pizzazz to your communications? Do you wish people could recall more of what you say? Make the decision to join me. Increase your impact by adding powerful stories to your work.

Lori L. Silverman is the owner of Partners for Progress (www.partnersforprogress.com), a management consulting firm, and co-author of "Stories Trainers Tell: 55 Ready-to-Use Stories to Make Training Stick."



Excerpts from "Stories Trainers Tell."

The Customer Strikes Back

Contributed by Robert McIlree

Paul, Jim and I were in Dallas doing a computer upgrade project over a long holiday weekend. Because of some problems, we really hadn't slept or eaten in twenty-four hours. Around nine o'clock on Saturday night we decided to go out to dinner.

On the way, Paul asked us to stop at a local drugstore. He approached a clerk who appeared to be wasting time behind the counter. "Excuse me. I need some help." She didn't respond. He said again, a little louder, "Excuse me. I really need some help." Sighing deeply, she turned around and barked, "Can't you see I'm busy?" You could hear her gum cracking as she chewed. Trying once more, Paul said, "Where can I find dermatological soaps?" As though he were completely clueless, she responded, "I have no idea. You'll need to find them yourself."

Paul was furious. How dare she respond so rudely to his request! Obviously she placed no value on his needs. At that moment, Jim's face lit up. "Hey, I know how to get help. I used to work for a chain of stores just like this. See those house phones? I think I know how to access the PA system. Go stand by a phone. I'll use this one. I'm going to dial 1, 2, 3. If you hear my voice, follow my lead."

About thirty seconds later, over the store's loudspeakers came Jim's words, "Customer in aisle four needs help with hair replacement." Close behind was Paul's voice. "Customer in aisle six needs help with incontinence products." By this time, you could hear the store manager running up and down the aisles, screaming, "Who's doing this? What's going on?" My voice came last. "Customer in aisle three needs help with athlete's foot." The store manager went wild.

Then it struck us. The store's security cameras might have caught us on tape! We could get thrown out for being vocal customers. We flew out the door to continue our quest for soap and a good meal.

In my world, the hallmark of good service is to "value my voice" as a customer. Think about your work. Whose voice do you value the most?

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For Lack of a System

Contributed by Larry P. English, president, INFORMATION IMPACT International, Inc.

An insurance company needed to understand its risks – exactly what it was paying for through its claims. Employees were downloading claims data so information could be examined in this manner. As we started analyzing medical diagnosis codes, we uncovered what appeared to be a problem. One region had a high incidence of hemorrhoid codes – so high that it was way outside the normal distribution. We wondered, "What's going on? What's causing this problem? Is there some sort of an epidemic we don't know about?"

Several of us got in touch with the regional claims supervisor. We explained that other departments were using the data, including the actuarial staff, and asked her what she knew about the situation. She exclaimed, "That's our data! We use it to pay claims. I didn't know anybody else saw it. We use that particular code to identify our PITAs – you know – claimants who are 'a pain in the...'. It helps us identify problem customers we need to approach with special caution."

You can imagine how surprised we were to hear this explanation. After we described to her the consequences of using this code, she agreed to seek another way to identify difficult customers.

No matter what the problem may be, "all problems seek solutions." The challenge is that the solution may have surprising consequences for others. So whenever your problems go in search of a solution, consider whom else it may impact.

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