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**YOUR MONEY**

# Storytelling Your Way to a Better Job or a Stronger Start-Up

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Shortcuts

By **ALINA TUGEND**

IT'S been called a strategic tool with “irresistible power” by Harvard Business Review. And “the major business lesson of 2014” by Entrepreneur magazine

What exciting new 21st-century technology is this?

The age-old art of storytelling — something humans have done since they could first communicate. So why has it become this year's buzzword? And what is its new value?

In these days of tougher-than-ever job searches, competition for crowdfunding and start-ups looking to be the next Google or Facebook, it's not enough just to offer up the facts about you or your company to prospective employers or investors. Or even to your own workers.

You need to be compelling, unforgettable, funny and smart. Magnetic, even. You need to be able to answer the question that might be lingering in the minds of the people you're trying to persuade: What makes you so special?

You need to have a good story.

“As human beings, we know that stories work, but when we get in a business relationship, we forget this,” said Keith Quesenberry, a lecturer at the Center for Leadership Education at Johns Hopkins University.

Learning — or relearning — how to tell stories requires some skill. And

consultants are lining up to teach it — sometimes for a hefty fee.

Although the power of storytelling to attract — and even manipulate — is well known, the reason for its appeal has been unclear. But it may have something to do with oxytocin, also called the love hormone.

Paul Zak, a professor of economics, psychology and management at Claremont Graduate University, studies oxytocin, which is produced in the brain. Researchers have found it to be plentiful in lactating women and released during orgasm. It is also thought to bolster trust and empathy.

To see the impact of storytelling on oxytocin, Professor Zak conducted a now well-known experiment. Participants had their blood drawn before and again after watching videos of character-driven stories. The result? When those watching the stories had an increase in oxytocin, they tended to help more — donating money to a charity associated with the story, for example.

But not every story is well told. Most of us know a compelling tale when we hear one, but “it’s difficult for people to articulate why they like what they like,” Professor Zak said.

Mr. Quesenberry decided to see if he could understand what drew people to a particular story. Along with a co-author and his graduate students, he dissected two years’ worth of Super Bowl commercials using Freytag’s Pyramid, named after a German novelist who saw common patterns in the plots of novels and stories and developed a diagram to analyze them.

It probably sounds familiar from middle-school English class: Act 1, scene setting; Act 2, rising action; Act 3, the turning point; Act 4, the falling action; and Act 5, the denouement or release. Variations of this include fewer or more stages, but they all follow the same pattern.

The team coded each of the Super Bowl commercials for their number of acts before they aired. Some had only one act, others went up to five.

Mr. Quesenberry determined that consumers rated the commercials with more acts as higher, which can increase the likelihood that they will be shared on social media.

In fact, this year he predicted that because the commercial called “Puppy Love,” advertising Budweiser, had the full number of plot points and told a

complete story, it would win in the ratings.

And sure enough, it was the viewers' favorite in a USA Today poll. Having adorable puppies and horses probably didn't hurt.

So does this translate into sales? Well, a Budweiser spokesman said that the company experienced "a marked improvement in share trends" after the puppy commercial.

While stories in commercials aren't new, as Mr. Quesenberry said, we "keep rediscovering this and have to remind ourselves of the point of stories in a business context." And while there is a formula, stories fail if they're perceived as formulaic. Walking that line is tricky.

Andrew Linderman tries to teach people how to find that balance. A story coach, he works with companies including American Express, PBS and Random House, charging \$1,800 to \$3,500 for workshops and \$500 to \$5,000 for one-on-one training (less for nonprofits and start-ups). For \$40, you can also take one of his two-hour classes, *Storytelling for Entrepreneurs*.

"The specifics of storytelling are relatively easy to articulate," he said. "It's the nuances that make a story distinct."

In a recent class in New York City, about 15 students wrote and told a story about a business experience — and struggled to figure out why their three-minute presentations often fell flat.

Rajesh Singh, 23, of Queens, who came with a friend with whom he plans to start a web development company, said his problem was, "I see patterns, but I'm not making others see the patterns."

The reason many stories don't work, Mr. Linderman explained, is that as adults, we tend to judge, analyze and explain an experience, rather than tell it.

"My boss is a jerk" is a judgment, he said. Showing with specifics why a boss is a jerk is much more effective.

"Good stories are detailed, honest and personal," he said. And stories we particularly like usually involve some sort of vulnerability "without emoting too much and going off the rails."

Will Mahony, 24, of Brooklyn, attended the class with his business partner because they plan to release an app next year and want to find

investors.

“There are so many apps and the marketplace is so crowded,” Mr. Mahony said. “We took the class because we want to nail down our story and our pitch — that is, intertwine the ‘ask’ within the story without being too forward.”

His first pitch wasn’t too successful, he said, but with some advice it improved. “It’s about balancing your personal story — incorporating your values, tying it together with a vision of the future, and telling how investors can get involved and also benefit themselves.”

Narativ, another company that teaches storytelling, grew out of the AIDS crisis. One of the company’s founders found that people with AIDS “were not afraid of dying, but they were afraid of leaving nothing behind,” said Jerome Deroy, Narativ’s executive officer. So they were encouraged to tell their stories, some of which were eventually filmed and used to raise research funds for AIDS.

Now Narativ, which charges \$6,000 to \$25,000 for speeches and trainings for corporations — prices vary for nonprofits — works with organizations all over the world.

Storytelling isn’t just for pitches. It can help board members understand a company’s goals or get employees in large companies to better relate to workers in other departments. For example, Mr. Deroy recounted a story told by a phone operator, Jose, who worked at a large health insurance company.

A client was refusing to wear a respirator for sleep apnea; it turned out that the client had seen his father die with a respirator and so feared using one. With Jose’s help, the client overcame his aversion, Mr. Deroy said, and a video of Jose’s tale became a hit on the company’s internal website as well as a basis for an advertising campaign.

PowerPoints are the bane of storytellers, but here are a few bullet points to keep in mind when developing a good story:

- Know who your audience is.
- Have a beginning, middle and end. (That sounds obvious, but people often forget that.)
- Use concrete details and personal experience.

- Don't self-censor.

- Don't try to memorize a story so it sounds rehearsed. It's not about perfection. It's about connecting.

It's that simple. And that complicated. You can have a multimillion-dollar movie that bombs and a brilliant five-act story in 30 seconds. After all, long before Twitter, Ernest Hemingway is said to have managed to tell a complete and heart-wrenching story in six words: "For sale: Baby shoes, never worn."

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