

CHAPTER 1

What is business storytelling?

Storytelling can be used to persuade, motivate, and inspire in ways that cold facts, bullet points and directives can't.

Annette Simmons, author of *The Story Factor*

When we started our business in 2005, the term 'business storytelling', or 'organisational storytelling', was nowhere to be seen. It was not bandied about on business websites, on blogs or in the media. It wasn't even on Wikipedia. So we came up with our own definition:

Business storytelling is sharing a story about an experience, but linking it to a business message that will influence and inspire your audience into action.

Like traditional storytelling, business storytelling tells a story, but unlike traditional stories, business stories carry a message to connect, inspire and engage an audience.

In this chapter we will explore the difference between traditional storytelling and business storytelling. We will also look at how metaphors and analogies differ from stories.

A story about storytelling

The definition we gave earlier is one that we came up with and to demonstrate what we mean, we are going to tell you a story. After all, this wouldn't be a book on storytelling if we didn't! We will set up the context of the story before actually sharing the story.

The context

Michael Brandt was Regional Executive at National Australia Bank. Michael was responsible for 16 branches and in every team in every branch he had the same problem: his team members did not meet their weekly targets for sales leads to the sales department—known as quality sales leads.

He held countless meetings where he talked to his teams about this issue and tried to coach them on the importance of referring leads to the sales team. At every meeting, Michael's team members reiterated that they understood their targets and knew what had to be done. Yet most of them failed to meet their targets—even when they were linked to their annual performance bonus.

Michael was at the end of his tether. He had tried everything he could think of over a period of 12 months. His frustration was tangible, and you can imagine how frustrating it must have been for his team members. Michael constantly asked them why they weren't meeting their targets. Why were the majority unable to achieve their weekly sales-leads targets?

Then one day they said to him, 'It's the one thing we hate doing. Every Monday when we come in to work we think, "Oh no, not weekly sales-leads targets again".'

Michael came to our workshop and said, 'I've tried everything for a year to help my team achieve their quality sales-leads targets and nothing has worked'.

So during one of our workshops, Michael constructed the following story.

The brussels sprouts story

When I was a kid, I hated brussels sprouts. Every time brussels sprouts were served at dinner, I always left them until last, hoping I would get away with not eating them. But, of course, my mother would never let me leave the table until I ate my brussels sprouts ... every last one.

One evening, when brussels sprouts were served yet again, I decided to eat my brussels sprouts first. Then I relaxed and enjoyed the rest of my meal.

Do you think we could treat our quality sales leads like brussels sprouts? None of us can leave the table unless we have eaten our brussels sprouts. Do you think we could eat them quickly and early in the week so that we can all relax and enjoy the rest of the week?

The results

A few weeks after our workshop, we saw Michael at a follow-up session. He told us that 11 of the 16 branches where he had visited and narrated his brussels sprouts story had achieved their sales-leads targets for two continuous weeks. It was the first time in a year that this had happened. And the only thing he had done differently was tell that story. He even told us that the term 'brussels sprouts' had become a shorthand motivator within the teams. Now his team members were asking each other, 'How many brussels sprouts have you eaten? I've already eaten three today and it's not even lunchtime!'

The story Michael used linked an everyday experience to a business message that achieved significant measurable results. That is the powerful impact business stories can have! The good news is that you already use storytelling. When you talk about the coffee you had yesterday, your last holiday or a recent meeting with a client, you are telling a story. People tell stories naturally, intuitively, organically because we are hardwired to do so. This means that we are hardwired to listen to stories too. This is great news for you as a leader because it means that your audience are ready and willing participants. People are eager to listen to — and love hearing — well-told, short, purposeful stories.

Stories are how we think. They are how we make meaning of life. Call them schemas, scripts, cognitive maps, mental models, metaphors or narratives. Stories are how we explain how things work, how we make decisions, how we justify our decisions, how we persuade others, how we understand our place in the world, create our identities, and define and teach social values.

**Dr Pamela Rutledge, Director, Media Psychology
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Even after his passing, Steve Jobs continues to inspire and engage us through his stories. We are hooked on Steve Jobs's stories: both the stories surrounding his life and the stories he shared with his listeners.

In Walter Isaacson's best-selling biography *Steve Jobs* there is a story that Jobs used to explain his own perfectionist streak.

The Steve Jobs story

As a young boy, Jobs had helped his father build a fence around their backyard, and he was told they had to use just as much care on the back of the fence as on the front.

'Nobody will ever know,' young Steve said. His father replied, 'But you will know. A true craftsman uses a good piece of wood even for the back of a cabinet against the wall,' his father explained, 'and they should do the same for the back of the fence'. It was the mark of an artist to have such a passion for perfection.

Jobs inherited that passion. His engineers at Apple were expected to place the chips inside the motherboard of every computer in a perfectly straight line.

'Nobody is going to see the PC board,' one of them protested. Jobs reacted as his father had: 'I want it to be as beautiful as possible, even if it's inside the box. A great carpenter isn't going to use lousy wood for the back of a cabinet, even though nobody's going to see it'.

Storytelling in business is not only the stories you share as a leader—such as Michael's brussels sprouts story—but also the stories that are shared about you, such as the Steve Jobs story. As a leader you need to be aware that both exist and both are powerful.

The buzz on business storytelling

There is a very big difference between storytelling in business and the storytelling you use at home with your friends and family to explain what Aunt Cecilia did yesterday or what happened

on your last big holiday overseas. So it is time for some tough love: the truth is that not everyone who tells stories can do it successfully in business. The trick is to master the difference between storytelling and storytelling in a business context.

If you think of storytelling across a spectrum, then business storytelling is at one end of the spectrum and traditional storytelling—the stuff you tell at home, in the pub or with family and friends—is at the other. Traditional storytelling is like life before Google; business storytelling is like life after Google. They really are very different!

There are three reasons why business storytelling is different from other forms of storytelling. Business stories:

- *have a purpose*, whether it is to sell your product or announce your company's new strategic direction
- *are supported by data*
- *are authentic*—true stories that relate back to your purpose.

Let's look at each of these in turn.

Purpose

A business story must have a purpose. What is the point of the story? What is the message you are trying to get across to your audience? In our personal life (traditional storytelling), we often tell stories that have no point except to get a laugh, share information or relay experiences. That's fine and appropriate in that context, but in business you have to emit a laser-beam-like focus on your purpose. We show you how to nail your purpose in chapter 4, but for now take a look at this example.

Matt Ritchie is the National Manager in Sales Strategy and Delivery at MLC Australia. Matt needed a story that would inspire his team to think differently about customer service. This is the story he shared.

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Bruce Springsteen and customer service

I was recently reading a magazine that featured an interview with Bruce Springsteen. Bruce Springsteen has been a musician and performer for more than 20 years and has a tremendous reputation as a live act.

When he was asked how he remains motivated night after night to perform at his best, he replied that while every night is a 'Bruce Springsteen concert night' to him, the audience have most likely paid money to see a Bruce Springsteen concert for the first—and possibly only—time in their lives. He added that wanting to give them the best-ever Bruce Springsteen experience is what makes him enthusiastic night after night.

Reading that article reminded me of all of us at work every day. While we might take hundreds of calls from hundreds of customers every day, one of those calls will be from a customer who has never called us before and who may never call us again, depending on our response. It might be the only contact they ever have with MLC. It might be the only 'Bruce Springsteen concert' they ever go to. Imagine the difference we could make if each and every customer, each and every time they call, got the full 'Bruce Springsteen experience'.

Matt's purpose was to inspire his team to think about customer service in a different way. With this purpose in mind he shared a personal experience and linked it to a business message.

How did this story make you feel? It sure struck a chord with everyone in Matt's audience. After reading the story, do you understand how customer service is to be delivered in this organisation? Does it make you want to deliver it in the way Matt describes? Would you remember this story? Do you think you could and would retell it to others?

These are your aims when you are communicating a story to your employees, clients, potential clients and all of your stakeholders. As Dan and Chip Heath suggest in their best-selling book, *Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die*, ask yourself the following three questions about your audience:

- Do they understand what I have just said?
- Can they remember it?
- Can they retell it without losing its meaning?

We have seen client after client use purposeful storytelling to successfully address these three challenges.

Data

The second difference between storytelling at the water cooler and storytelling in the boardroom is that in the boardroom you have to take a hard-nosed business approach to storytelling. That means you can never present in a fairy outfit or start a story with ‘Once upon a time’ — not that there is anything wrong with that, if your audience is under five.

When you use stories to pitch for work or present as a keynote speaker at an event, you have to include the hard facts, data and figures, and support this data with stories.

When we present about our business, we use the employee engagement scores that we have lifted, case studies and other evaluation results that show how we have helped our clients succeed. We then bring this data alive using stories. The stories we tell make the intangible, tangible. They explain the data and information in a way that is memorable and engaging. Stories hook your audience to your data. Data alone is hard to understand, remember and retell (thus failing to address the three challenges that Dan and Chip Heath pose).

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Storytelling is a crucial tool for management and leadership, because often, nothing else works. Charts leave listeners bemused. Prose remains unread. Dialogue is just too laborious and slow. Time after time, when faced with the task of persuading a group of managers or front-line staff in a large organisation to get enthusiastic about a major change, storytelling is the only thing that works.

Steve Denning, organisational storyteller and author

We are here to set you up for success and we would never suggest that all you need is stories. You will never hear us say fluffy things such as 'Just find the narrative' or 'Just tell your brand story or leadership story'. Instead, repeat after us: 'In business storytelling, your stories support your data'. But most leaders just stop with data, and this limits, or even hinders, their success. Why? Because just sticking with the facts is doing things the old way and will bore your audience into a coma. The important thing you need to do as a leader is to bring the facts to life using stories. Stories help you connect, engage and inspire your audience, which data simply cannot do.

Maybe stories are just data with a soul.

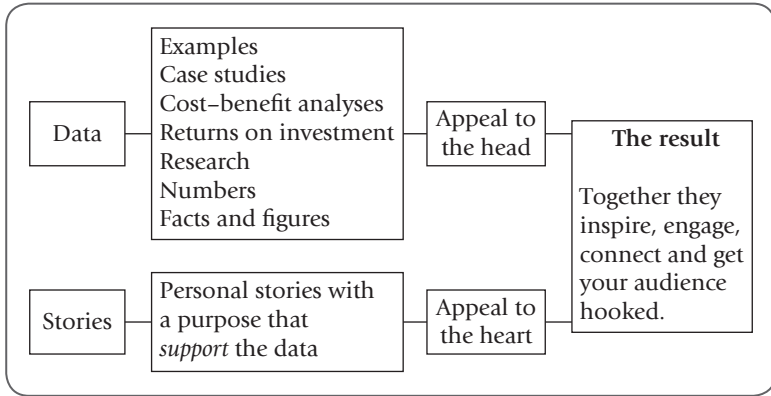
Brené Brown, *The Power of Vulnerability* (TED Talks video)

Of course, your data will vary depending on what you do and the industry in which you do it. Data may be a report, a business case, a cost-benefit analysis, research, statistics, an implementation plan or a Gantt chart. You may find your data exciting, but rest assured most of your audience will not. So just providing this information is not enough to get people hooked on what you are saying.

In the past, leaders presented only the facts, figures and data. But this is often difficult for an audience to understand,

remember and retell—which is your aim. And there’s a flipside to the coin too: stories without data are all sizzle and no steak. Have a look at figure 1.1 for a diagrammatic representation of how the combination of data and stories will get your audience hooked.

Figure 1.1: data + story model



Very few leaders use both data and stories and even fewer do it in an inspiring way. So the minute you can do both, you will enjoy far greater success. In sales, you will move straight out in front of your competitors and in leadership you will have a positive impact on your employees and your personal leadership brand.

Authenticity

The third difference between a business story and a traditional story is that in business all the stories you tell must be true.

Do you remember the controversy over the book *A Million Little Pieces* by James Frey? It was promoted by Oprah Winfrey’s book club and became an instant hit. James Frey presented his book as a non-fiction memoir of his years as a drug addict, alcoholic and criminal. Later it was revealed that

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the author had wildly embellished and fabricated parts of the book. The book was then mocked as 'A Million Little Lies'.

Frey appeared again on Oprah Winfrey's show and admitted he had not been truthful in the book. Winfrey said, 'I feel duped. But more importantly, I feel that you betrayed millions of readers.'

We cannot stress enough how important it is for you in business to ensure all the stories you tell are authentic. If you do not and people find out the truth, it will have a negative backlash on your reputation.

If you are still not convinced of this, think about these two words: 'Lance' and 'Armstrong'. After being stripped of his seven Tour de France titles Armstrong continued to plead his innocence. In January 2013, Armstrong finally admitted to using drugs throughout his professional cycling career. This came after years of denying allegations and telling stories that were simply not true. By his own admission he will now spend the rest of his life trying to recover his credibility.

If you were an Armstrong fan, do you remember how you felt when he admitted this? Or can you think of another time you were told a story that you later found out was not true? Did you feel duped, or betrayed, or angry ... or all three? For your business storytelling to be successful, everything about it has to be authentic. You absolutely do not want a James Frey or a Lance Armstrong moment in your professional life.

Metaphors and analogies

It is worth spending just a bit of time on metaphors and analogies as we are often asked, 'Are they the same as stories?' The answer is, 'No, they are not!'

(continued)

Metaphors and analogies (cont'd)

A story has a beginning, a middle and an ending. It is about a specific event and it has emotion (makes your audience feel something) and sensory data (paints a picture for your audience). A metaphor or analogy usually just paints a picture or gives your audience an easy way of understanding something.

Technically there is a difference between metaphors and analogies but for simplicity we will treat them as the same. They both provide your audience with an easy way of comparing something. For example, Shakespeare famously said, 'All the world's a stage' and Forrest Gump equally profoundly said, 'My momma always said, "Life was like a box of chocolates. You never know what you're gonna get"'.

Metaphors and analogies work when you are trying to get people to grasp a difficult concept. They work particularly well when you are trying to educate people. Quite often trainers and teachers will use a lot of metaphors and analogies.

For example, a metaphor is useful for explaining the difference between a bull and a bear market: think of a bear market as a bear clawing prices down with its claws and think of a bull market as a bull tossing prices up with its horns. Simple and easy to remember!

A word of caution: metaphors and analogies do not necessarily inspire and engage your audience. A mistake people can make with analogies is to use an analogy that in itself needs explaining. Remember that the reason for using an analogy is to help people better understand something. So if your analogy poses more questions than answers, don't use it.

Take, for example, the rather useless analogy made by an industry expert in 2008 when BHP was bidding to take over Rio Tinto. The expert described the situation as two giants fighting in a jungle, adding that it would be best to sit back and watch as no-one knows what may fall off the back of a truck.

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This analogy was ridiculed in national newspapers as it did nothing to help people understand what this expert was trying to say. It only posed more questions, such as what the giants were doing in the jungle, who was driving the truck and what exactly was on the truck that could fall off! It was an analogy that did not help clarify the message.

So metaphors and analogies have a purpose, but they are not stories. We suggest using a combination: a metaphor or an analogy where appropriate (when you want to give your audience a quick way of understanding something) and stories to connect, engage and inspire.

We hope you are now excited by the possibilities of what storytelling can do for you when it is purposeful, authentic and supported by data and that you realise that people who use only analogies and metaphors are paddling a canoe up a creek without an oar.

In a nutshell

Did you get hooked?

- Business storytelling is different from traditional storytelling because in business your stories have a purpose; are supported by data; and are authentic, true stories that relate back to your purpose.
- Stories help you meet the three vital challenges of communicating as a leader:
 - Can people understand what you are saying?
 - Can they remember the story?
 - Can they retell it?

Data alone cannot do this.

Hooked

- A story is not the same as a metaphor or an analogy. Metaphors and analogies provide your audience with an easy way to compare something but do not necessarily engage or inspire.
- Beware the metaphor or analogy that itself needs further explanation.
- In a business context you need to use a combination of metaphors, analogies and stories, as appropriate: metaphors and analogies when you want to give your audience a quick way of understanding something, and stories to connect, engage and inspire.

How hooked are you?

As a leader, what do you think are some points from this chapter that you could use the next time you are in front of an audience? What about other leaders you admire: are they using any of the ideas in this chapter?

Now that you understand the concept of business storytelling, read the next chapter to discover the importance of storytelling in a business context.