

Tales Worth Telling:
How the ageless power of stories delivers business success



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Summary

The ceaseless flood of 21st century business communication has created unprecedented message volume. This blizzard of competing noise demands an effective communication approach if the audience is to hear, understand and retain an organization's message. Unfortunately, contemporary message styles are largely monologue communication forms — one-way bombastic exhibitions that employ some form of shouting to be heard above competing messages, undercutting understanding and persuasive impact. Replacing monologue or one-way communication forms with two-way or dialogue communication is a time-tested, effective approach to break through communication clutter, create context and heighten audience understanding. The advanced application of classic storytelling techniques is both the most tested and most effective approach to communication — including business communication. At the cornerstone of the storytelling approach is the development of authentic stories that accurately showcase an organization's true market distinction and purpose. Storytelling is simultaneously a communications philosophy, a building block and technique. Because it is versatile, and accepted across audiences and cultures, it has widespread general, marketing and management application.

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In the 21st century, the demand for constant, varied and effective business communication has never been greater. Whether promoting a new product, rallying employees around goals or adapting to the Internet's market rhythm — unbound by storefronts, national borders or time of day — deploying effective business messages has never been more important.

Likewise, the demands on business communicators have never been greater. Two-thirds of all salaried business managers have primary responsibilities that include persuasive business writing. With the “flattening” of traditional business structures, this number is expected to increase.¹ Yet the sheer volume of communication has done little to improve understanding between message sender and recipient. In fact, it may have harmed it.²

In its myriad forms of promotion, strategic marketing, intra-organization training, carefully crafted public relations, “lawyered-up” product disclaimers and new technology “platforms” (the list is endless really), the effort to persuasively communicate in business is massive. What results from all this activity? Is the collective understanding of business audiences improved by current communication methods? Is the *value* of business organizations — their products and services — better understood by those who receive these communications? Evidence suggests the answer to these questions is no. Welcome to the vexing world of business communications in the 21st century.

How do traditional business communication practices fuel this situation?

In many ways. Consider the volume of business communication that is propaganda — and openly acknowledged as such by the sender and receiver. Contemporary examples include television commercials in which a major theme is that the organization sponsoring the message is lying, and that is intended to be part of the humor and appeal of the message. Or consider the subtler persuasive message style in which the recipient is not “so sure” about the authenticity of skewed message claims but is leery — “guarded” even — in how to consider and use the information learned. Contemporary examples include endorsements or testimonials for products or services in which those making the endorsement may or may not be paid by the organization they are endorsing — and the message recipient has difficulty determining whether there is a paid relationship. Or consider the monumental use of message “spin,” not just in politics, but also in everyday business communication. In many cases, “spin” almost seeks audience complicity, a wink that says, “Hey we know this is probably not true but it sure is fun.”

Too frequently these business communication methods leave audiences with an increasing residue of unease, a feeling that product and brand information is always, to one degree or another, lying and thus, to one degree or another, should always be discounted or ignored. Is it no wonder then that “traditional” business communication

approaches have passed the point of diminishing effectiveness returns? As the traditional advertising industry grapples with relevance and "product placement," public relations fights to demonstrate independence, credibility and some professional chops that indicate compelling communication is why we are here in the first place. Meanwhile the media that both industries employ for communication continues to become less and less relevant and more and more sickly.

Monologue in a Dialogue World

All of these communication styles are practiced in ways that borrow from the same ideological root. Traditional business communication is driven by a top-down, "I have something important to tell you (and sell you)" message that relies largely on the skill of the messenger in presenting problems (and their solutions) in one-way, limited communication. Those receiving the messages can decide to listen or ignore them, but in short the messenger talks "at", not "with" audiences, all the while hoping for the outcome that delivers the organization's vested interest.

Part sincerity, part bombast and part feudalism, this *monologue* communication style embraces the belief that careful message and content control will eliminate or silence whatever feedback might derail the intrepid business communicator. Coupled with a tin-ear attitude practiced by many who believe, "I know what's important to tell my audience," seldom is there a true dialogue between message sender and recipient in classic business communication.

In the world of consumer marketing this haughty style of communication is archaic and potentially damaging. In the world of more *complicated* business commerce (what some call business-to-business or B2B) this approach can be lethal.

B2B commerce is marked by long sales cycles, complex transaction procedures, customized solutions and involvement from multiple points within an organization. Such "complicated" commerce benefits little from monologue communication. For instance, the nature of how architects or systems integrators communicate their professional value (and that of the company they represent) is directly linked to the needs of a given customer. At the business prospecting or problem identification stage, solving unique problems requires an interactive style of business communication that stresses collaboration rather than the bombast of "Buy Now!" or "Limited Time Offer — Act Now!"

Contemporary B2B communication and marketing approaches remain largely hybrids of the old business-to-consumer, top-down communications world. Consider this example of a well-known "B2B communications" company active in global financial markets. While omitting its identity, below is the actual introductory paragraph that describes company services:

"... Delivers fully integrated, industry-driven B2B communication solutions that help businesses efficiently manage their global trading partner communities,

resulting in improved customer relationships and increased revenue and profitability. To give our customers the complete value-added B2B communication solutions they need, we leverage our own core competencies with those of selected partners. Through these alliances ... offers dynamic solutions that showcase the latest in technology and best business practices and deliver superior value."

All we can say is Wow! What does THAT mean? And this is the company's home page introduction of services for prospective clients. There's barely a nugget of anything that acknowledges the prospect's uniqueness or invites their perspective in solving their business "problem." How would a reader draw any conclusion other than this company is talking at them and not with them?

This inscrutable and difficult communication is unfortunate, inefficient³ and most of all, (we believe) an undesirable way to conduct commerce at the dawn of the 21st-century economy.⁴ As "brands" in virtually all business sectors continue to splinter and increasingly become mere commodities (despite broad communication efforts to avoid such a fate),⁵ markets become increasingly narrow and so these approaches are not only less effective, but potential instruments of communication alienation.⁶ Market segments shrink, business stakes rise and the resulting bombardment of more and more intense monologue communication (such as the above) creates a message culture that neither acknowledges the audience's intelligence, nor demonstrates any interest in what the audience might have to contribute.⁷ In short, it also denies the very essence of what makes much "communication" communicative in the first place — *dialogue*.

Dialogue for Business Communication

Dialogue is not a new communication concept. It's about as ancient as any idea that exists about civilization, and how we have evolved from using petroglyphs to podcasts in our human communications toolbox. But in 21st-century global commerce, dialogue has been marginalized to the backwaters of marketing and management communication — only infrequently called upon to carry some of the water of commerce, or else left to the "kids" to dabble with on their social network pages.

Yet "dialogue" has flourished in some applications as a data-driven marketing technique that intensifies and customizes vendor/consumer interactions and the customer service dimensions that support them.⁸ We applaud this approach and see it as a natural extension of advances in secondary market research, market segmentation, customer fulfillment and other areas.

However, our use of the term "dialogue" in guiding business communication *message development* and *distribution* is something different, more seminal and certainly more specific. It is simultaneously an **attitude** of how to acknowledge nascent (but potentially far-reaching) shifts in the vendor/customer transaction dynamic, a way to **build** effective

business messages for this change, and a **technique** to effectively reach audiences with a new message “attitude.”

In our conception of dialogue, the sender still largely controls when, where and how business communication (in all its forms) is initiated. But additionally, message senders acknowledge the increasingly unique needs and expectations of their audiences and invite their *participation* in arriving at a mutually beneficial dialogue and ultimately, relationship. Embracing this approach will heavily affect message content, style and distribution channels. In our view, true, two-way business communication:

1. Acknowledges the significance of audience behavior and decisions as “challenges” which need to be addressed on a continuing basis.
2. Is guided by “civil” communication.
3. Builds upon existing audience knowledge and sophistication about the topic in particular and/or audience behavior in general.
4. “Emotionally aligns” the interest of the business communicator and audience.
5. Recognizes that the audience has an ever-increasing need for useful information in an evermore fragmented business world.
6. Emphasizes authentic message points.
7. Rejects sometimes popular but disdainful concepts of audience groups or market segments (e.g., sheep, lemmings, cattle, etc.)

In short it is an approach that heightens the civility, humanity and respect of business communication.

But business communication is not developed *per se* to produce social harmony, community respect or cultural solidarity. It is developed to support business — to help generate revenues, serve missions, facilitate reinvestment and satisfy shareholders. So how does a contemporary business employ a dialogue communications style that does all the above, while being effective and practical?

The Ageless Wisdom of the Story

The development of civilization not only required peoples to communicate, but to do so in ways where meaning and mutual understanding were paramount. The stringing together of mere “facts” required a setting, or boundaries, through which the overall value of messages grew larger than the sum of their individual parts. Thus was born the story and the element that makes it distinctive in the modern world, context.

This time-tested approach to effective communications is pervasive and has transcended cultures and time. It has been well used by Caesar, Chaucer, Lincoln, FDR, Richard Pryor, Fred Rogers and countless others. It has survived because communicators have recognized the many benefits of the story and the lasting audience impact it creates. Most important, it has all the elements that make it a powerful tool in the ever-growing, technocratic, emoticon-laden, sound bite world of business communications in the 21st century. Even the shortest YouTube video tells a story — if it's effective.

Regardless of the technology employed, stories cut through traditional communication roadblocks. Audience suspicion that comes with overtly persuasive communication⁹ is greatly dampened in a story and in turn, audiences are compelled to more carefully listen to the message. The story invites an audience's emotional participation¹⁰, tapping into powerful communication anchors and the "collective unconscious."¹¹ In fact the story might fairly be considered the original "value-added" concept — the communicator supplies the contextual story, and the audience brings the imagination that heightens message impact.

There are numerous examples of this in the business world.

"This idea was prominent in the recent rebound of EDS. In 2005 the company launched 'Storytellers'. The employee-led communications expressed company mission and goals to operations worldwide through individual employee stories. Recognizing that peer-to-peer communication enhanced trust, this approach was married with the company's overall business direction."¹²

The context that stories deliver may provide additional benefits, because it may be directly linked to the "hard-wired" ways we learn. A leader in the storytelling branch of communications, consultant Annette Simmons says,

"We need stories because cognitive learning doesn't always cut it. If it did, any of us who wanted to lose weight would only need to read one diet book. People don't have flip-top heads that open for you to shove information down."¹³

The story is also a great equalizer in basic human interaction — going far toward eliminating the power, status and authority dynamics that can impair the connection between messenger and audience. A good story brings the business organization off the superiority pedestal and puts it on the same level as the audience. A good story allows the storyteller to acknowledge the audience's intelligence and build upon this knowledge to improve engagement and communication.¹⁴ In promotional applications, putting a service or product message in a "story style" adds context¹⁵ and drives more effective use of analogies and examples to maximize meaning.

"Once upon a time (see how you took notice), businesses sought to be distinctive — forever building a better mousetrap in the name of business success. That worked until businesses built so many mousetraps that the distinctive benefits of

each were diluted and largely lost on the marketplace. That's when purveyors of both consumer products and complex services realized that authenticity in the business dynamic had replaced distinction. To be different had evolved to be the same — now to be truly different, one needed to be authentic.¹⁶

Until now, this good advice has been largely handcuffed by the tendency to stuff “authenticity” into legacy communication styles that by their very nature are anti-dialogue and diminish authenticity.

The story improves authenticity and also, most valuably, establishes context. Business communications delivered in story form are a coherent whole, possessing a beginning, middle and end. This style of communications helps build clarity and goes far toward linking or simplifying important, but disjointed, notions. It heightens audience understanding.¹⁷

We find that not every story is sufficiently capable to create this communication affect. Persuasive business communications rolled into a storytelling paradigm must possess some critical characteristics.

1. The story must have context and be told by fluent storytellers.

What the messenger says about a product, service or business must have **depth** and **provide a coherent whole** to enhance audience understanding. Those presenting the story must be **fluent storytellers** who acknowledge the power of clarifying to communications effectiveness and have great command of their topic.

2. The story must be authentic — rooted in a business' competitive facts and its core business purpose.

Authenticity in telling business stories is everything because it:

- A. Builds audience trust, which
- B. Determines how receptive an audience is to the story content, which is
- C. Largely determinant of communication success.

3. Measures of story effectiveness must be frequent and appropriately used.

Business leaders communicate to have impact. Knowing how, when and under what conditions this is maximized is essential to building and applying story communication techniques.¹⁸ This requires extensive measurement of your audiences that in itself is authentic¹⁹ (i.e. reliable) and appropriately matched with specific communication tactics and time frames.²⁰

These influences can be found in far-ranging examples of how business is leveraging the power of storytelling. Consider Xerox. In August 2001, it named Anne Mulcahy as its first woman CEO. The company was languishing with underperforming stock and weakness in its core businesses. Wall Street was down on the company, wondering if it would survive. Employee morale was low. Mulcahy says storytelling was the cornerstone of leading a company rebound:

“Storytelling was hugely important. At our town meetings, the most frequently asked questions weren’t whether we’d survive, but what we would look like when we did. I got great advice: Write a story. We wrote a Wall Street Journal article, because they had been particularly nasty about us, dated five years out. It was about where we could be if we really stood up to the plate. And people loved it. No matter where I go, they pull that article out. They personalized it.”²¹

With the story as a central aid, Mulcahy also aggressively restructured Xerox's debt, closed divisions and cut expenses. A year later, the company reported an operating profit.

The Business Connection

As the previously cited examples illustrate, employing authentic stories to drive effective business communication is growing in popularity. Solid approaches to story creation and classification, message distribution and measurement impact are among the established ideas currently in circulation.

As examples, consider the detailed work on considerations in selecting the most appropriate story type²² or “story line.”²³ These efforts detail what is among the most important considerations in storytelling development, and perhaps surprisingly reveal there are relatively few business story types.

The continued transformation (some would say eradication) of brands as commodities has also been addressed in a storytelling business communication context. Klein²⁴ reveals that “brand blindness” was actually begot by big brands themselves (starting in tobacco) and that unchecked, traditional business communication approaches will accelerate brand dilution. Among the overriding benefits of the humble story is its ability to pull back from this fate while enhancing communication value.

The trend of “brand as supply chain phenomenon”²⁵ has also been addressed in a story context. The idea that brand size supersedes brand value runs opposite to the primary benefit of authentic storytelling. By carefully distinguishing story “content” and “narrative,”²⁶ these seemingly different ideas can coexist.

Even more encouraging has been the sustained effort to marry the practice of business storytelling with heightened standards of enterprise accountability, measurement impact and eventually, ROI analysis. Binneman²⁷ and Paine, Draper and Jeffrey²⁸ are among

those who have identified approaches that embrace, not avoid, measurement, including extensive numeric gauging.

Conclusion

The technology challenges of the 21st century have only accelerated the shouting that is common in most one-way, monologue business communication. Rapid changes in markets and globalization have helped create unprecedented crowding in the business communications landscape. We see authentic storytelling as a promising (and time-tested way) to tackle this problem as it combines two of the most critical attributes in developing any persuasive communication: context and trust.

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