

The Secret Weapon That Will Make You and Your Business Stand Out in the War of Ideas



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A Silicon Valley venture capital investor turned to me during a recent lunch and said, “I’ve seen more than 2,000 pitches, and I can only remember about 10 of them.”

“What made the 10 stand out?” I asked.

“They all told a personal story.”

Professional investors agree: ideas that catch on are wrapped in story. “Show me an MBA and your sales numbers, that’s fine. But tell me a great story about how you got started and your vision, and we’ll talk.” says *Shark Tank*’s Barbara Corcoran.

Related: [How Storytelling Helps Business Connect With Customers and Drive Growth](#)

Although stories inform, illuminate and inspire, very few entrepreneurs and business professionals are aware of the power of story to persuade. But it gives those who do master the art of storytelling a significant competitive advantage. In today’s increasingly automated world where robots are replacing humans in nearly every task, storytelling is the one skill that will keep you relevant and successful through your career.

“Storytelling is the most underrated skill,” says Ben Horowitz, general partner with venture capital firm Andreessen Horowitz. “The company story is the company strategy. If don't have a clearly articulated story, you don't have a clear and well thought-out strategy. The story must explain at a fundamental level why you exist.”

While conducting the research for my new book, *The Storyteller's Secret*, I discovered that many of the world's most successful business leaders are master storytellers: Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz, Facebook COO Sheryl Sandberg, Bill Gates, Richard Branson, Sara Blakely and others. While their stories are very different, they share three common communication habits.

1. Make stories at least 65 percent of your presentation.

Human rights attorney Bryan Stevenson received TED's longest standing ovation. In his now famous TED talk, Stevenson told three personal stories to reinforce the theme of injustice in the prison system. Stevenson spoke about his grandmother, meeting Rosa Parks and an event that happened in a courtroom when he was particularly drained -- an incident that gave him the courage to go on.

"Narrative is hugely important in effective communication," Stevenson told me. He should know. Stevenson argues and wins cases before the U.S. Supreme Court. Stevenson believes story is the secret to winning hearts and minds.

Related: [The 5 Elements of Storytelling Every Entrepreneur Needs to Know](#)

2. Introduce heroes and villains.

Tesla CEO and space visionary Elon Musk relies on the components of story to pitch products, notably heroes and villains. When Musk introduced the Tesla Powerwall, a home battery to generate energy from sunlight, he launched the presentation in the form of a problem (villain) and solution (hero).

"This is how it is today," Musk began as he showed a photo of a power plant spewing pollution into the air. "It's pretty bad. It sucks. This is real. This is actually how most power is generated, with fossil fuels."

Musk continued: “The solution is in two parts. Part one, the sun. We have this handy fusion reactor in the sky called the sun. You don’t have to do anything. It just works. It shows up every day and produces ridiculous amounts of power.”

A technology blogger covering the event wrote, “Dude’s selling a battery and still manages to be inspiring.” Musk is inspiring because he understands the language that’s hardwired in our DNA: story.

3. If you’ve faced hardship, share it.

Once you’ve introduced a villain, the hero of your story must wage battle against the adversary. People don’t want to hear about your solution or your success until they know you understand their failures and struggles. Great storytellers are relatable because they share their tales of struggles, failures and hardships.

Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz often tells the story of growing up in a Brooklyn housing project and watching as his family struggled after his father was injured on the job. They had no health insurance and found it difficult to make ends meet. The story underpins Schultz’s initiatives such as offering health insurance for all employees, including part-time workers.

Don’t pretend you’ve never had to struggle. Embrace your past and the experiences that define you.

There’s a war going on -- a war of ideas. Selling products, building companies and grabbing attention are increasingly difficult in this hyper-competitive global economy. Your story might very well be the secret weapon that you need to stand out.