

Unraveling the technique of storytelling

Taking advantage of a simple method to make your message stick

BY HELEN LOVE

Storytelling is one of those communication methods that has, up until recently, been surrounded by an air of suspicion. Senior leaders were sceptical of its value and considered it to be a waste of time. But not any more, says Helen Love, who was involved with the introduction of storytelling at Microsoft. Here, we learn why imagery and anecdotes can be the perfect tools for aligning employees with the company strategy.

Storytelling is currently manifesting itself as one of the latest and most popular communication tools at the disposal of savvy leaders. Leaders who engage most successfully with their audiences and get their business messages understood at all levels are those most likely to eschew powerpoint presentations in favor of a more informal and anecdotal approach to communicating business strategy.

But there has long been a sort of negative association with storytelling in a business context. It's either seen as a pejorative activity – gossip around the coffee machine – or it's regarded as a woolly distortion of fact, better suited to the more touchy-feely, softer business disciplines, such as people management, than taking its rightful place in the armory of communication tools at our disposal.

So why is storytelling enjoying such a surge of popularity and, more importantly, as communicators, how can we ensure it's effective?

Create an emotional connection

If I look back on a communications career where I've worked with numerous leaders and senior managers in various industries, it strikes me that those who were most adept at engaging their teams were those with a very specific communication ability. They were able to make their communication accessible to audiences by presenting them as stories or anecdotes, which allowed the listeners to make an emotional connection with what the speaker was saying. Even more popular were those who could add to the mix a healthy dash of humor and a sprinkle of self deprecation.

Illustrate the strategy for better understanding

Traditional organizational communications have for a long time taken the form of “death by powerpoint”, an excessive use of numerical statistics and pie charts and an obsession with the use of business and technical buzzwords and jargon to make often tedious content sound impressive and serious. But this is no way to ensure understanding of your business strategy and buy-in from the people responsible for delivering against it. On the contrary, research proves there's little actual subsequent recall of content from statistics, slides or business documents. However, if you can put your strategy into context by illustrating it with a simple, compelling and emotionally engaging narrative, then the ability of your audience to recall, relate to and act upon your words will be far higher – an important consideration once you've all left the meeting room and are expected to perform.

It's our responsibility as internal communicators to make sure that we take full advantage of a simple method to improve the value, quality and "stickiness" of our messages.

A case study

In Microsoft, like in many large companies, we had a campaign around the concept of citizenship. This embodied elements of community and charity involvement, employee engagement and, most important for the company, a strategic business focus on using technology to improve the lives and economic fortunes of people and businesses in the UK. Of course we had the numerous internal and external powerpoint presentations defining this all to the Nth degree.

We had reams of documents to illustrate the mission statement, the business proposition, the tactical activity. We had buzzwords and acronyms coming out of our ears. And we had enthusiastic ambassadors who believed in this with a passion you can only imagine.

But the campaign never really captured hearts and imaginations, until we began to harness the power of storytelling to illustrate the advantages of the strategy.

An accomplished storytelling expert, Nicki Hayes, was brought in to help create a series of 30 one-minute stories from around the UK, each of which illustrated a different element of the citizenship campaign. Each brief narrative concentrated on one individual, telling his or her story in an emotional and evocative way. The people featured ranged from the severely disabled to educational underachievers, from stressed executives to budgeterigar fanciers, from non-English speaking immigrants to lively nonagenarians, with many others in between.

The text was simple. It explained their story, their background, their problem and then showed how technology had been able to help.

The immediate reaction to the booklet of stories was positive and powerful. Here was something that touched people on an emotional level. It was utterly believable, as it used real people. It was inspiring as it told how people beat seemingly insurmountable odds. It allowed the reader to make emotional connections with the characters featured, to be shocked, to laugh, to cry and to make an important subliminal association between these tales of individual achievement and the part Microsoft systems and support had to play in them. This was a practical and successful application of the art of "storytelling".

Help leaders to drive engagement

One of the most important business successes we seek from our current leaders is the ability to engage with their employees. Driving engagement has been proven to reduce attrition, drive retention, improve productivity, inspire advocacy and drive bottom line results, and is an even more compelling issue in the current period of potential economic downturn. But we also see leaders who engage with their audiences and inspire them, lead from the front, demonstrate required behaviors and drive performance improvements. What better way to engage with someone than by reaching out on a personal level with a uniquely inspirational story?

The best leaders are able to make those personal connections, to use illustrations which can be delivered to a mass audience, yet whose strength lies in their individual appeal or resonance. In a way, storytelling can be an even stronger engagement communication tool than participative action teams, as the story can become a viral communication, being passed from mouth to mouth, up, down, around and external to the organization. It can grow with the telling, it can become a modern myth, it can cement a company's position and ultimately it can make the difference between success and failure.

Why does storytelling work?

A recent study by the London Business School¹ demonstrated that information retention levels for traditional communications media can differ quite substantially. The sole use of statistics in a presentation can lead to a retention rate of around five-10 percent at best. If you couple the statistics with a bit of storytelling, you can increase the retention rate to around 25-30 percent. But the biggest impact comes from using storytelling as a stand alone communication



Helen Love has been working in the internal communication arena for the past 13 years, running employee communications for companies including Unisys, Microsoft UK and Yahoo! Europe. She and her business partner, Geoffrey Morgan, recently launched a new company called Intuitive Brands, designed specifically to offer a bespoke and holistic service to help companies of all sizes design, implement and manage employee engagement and communication strategies.

KEY POINTS

- Storytelling is becoming more popular in companies as a way of creating awareness and understanding of the business strategy among employees.
- When put into a simple, compelling and emotionally engaging narrative, messages will have a retention rate of between 65-70 percent, compared to around five-10 percent when powerpoint slides alone are used.
- Microsoft is one of the many global organizations that has successfully implemented a storytelling program.
- Other methods of storytelling, which may not be immediately obvious, include blog writing and networking sites.

“THIS TECHNIQUE CAN BE USED TO SHAPE THE FUTURE DIRECTION AND SUCCESS OF THE COMPANY”

- ◀ medium. This can drive the retention rate of your audience up to as much as 65-70 percent. This is a pretty important message for any leader trying to communicate the brand offering, the mission and the strategy statements to their employees.

The benefits of storytelling

When the person telling the story is both skillful and persuasive, this technique can be used not only as a form of leadership, it can also be used to incite action, to communicate personality and drive, to build the brand, to share key knowledge or learning, to drive collaboration, to illustrate values and behaviors, to dispel rumors, to define and give context to the strategy, indeed to shape the future direction and success of the company.

Transferable skills are highlighted

Storytelling can also help companies to identify and harness transferable skills within their workforce. If you place a group of co-workers into a situation where they're encouraged to share personal stories, then you can make some quite startling discoveries about the individuals concerned.

Chances are, in a room of 50 or so people, you'll find at least one who has represented his or her country at sport, for example. You'll find individuals with specific skill sets in their home or social lives which can be easily transferred into their professional environment to enhance their individual and company performance.

The father who trains the local rugby team will have developed coaching and mentoring skills. The scuba enthusiast who has passed instructor qualifications will have an aptitude not only for teaching, but also for keeping himself and others calm in potentially stressful or dangerous situations. The budding novelist may be able to apply her creative skills towards producing more compelling and meaningful corporate literature. And, true to form, the retention of information about individuals will be higher than normal in this scenario. You may not know everything that John does in his professional role, for example, but you're very likely to remember an interesting personal story about him and to maintain a subsequent connection because of it.

When I run training courses, I often ask people at the start of the day to share an “intriguing fact” about themselves with the rest of the class, something that wouldn't normally be revealed in the course of a normal conversation. Not only does this act as an ice breaker, but it allows other members of the group to establish an immediate connection and association with a total stranger.

Messages are retained

It's amazing how many people you can bump into again at a later date, and while you may not be able to recall their job title or where you met them, you do remember that intriguing fact or personal story because the stories are “sticky”. You may also afford them respect and admiration because of what they've achieved in their personal lives or because of specific hardships or challenges you know they've overcome. Although the trigger for such respect is not specifically work related, the positive association remains and can have a knock on effect on your views of that same person in a professional context.

By breaking away from the work persona to share a story, you also drive people to break away from pre-judgement and supposition, to break away from established patterns of thinking and to view colleagues, situations and business in a different light.

In short, storytelling can shape behaviors and encourage alternative thinking.

Clues are given to employees' behavior

It can also reveal to us how our colleagues will react in a given situation. Characteristics and behaviors that we glimpse in people when we hear their personal stories and see them being tested by circumstances will surely impact their involuntary reactions and behaviors in professional situations.

Stories reveal how people react in particular situations, and shape our expectations of their future performance. Based on the stories we hear, we make personal judgements to categorize the characters as heroes, villains, fools or victims, and we anticipate behaviors in accordance with those categorizations.

Telling stories through blogs

Storytelling is already prevalent in most organizations, without our even being aware of it. What's a blog other than a personal account or story, to give context and meaning to a particular issue, for example?

Several large companies have been deliberately harnessing the power of storytelling in blogs for many years to shape and reinforce their business.

Once again, Microsoft provides us with a good example. There are literally hundreds of

independent bloggers within the organization, who use personal accounts to communicate to both internal and external audiences, recounting their personal experiences to allow others to understand and empathize with the company. The bloggers are seen as company evangelists, able to harness their storytelling – or narrative knowledge, as it’s sometimes described – to open up the organization in a way no other communication tool can.

In the past, Microsoft bloggers have been responsible for helping to shape public perception of the organization, by responding to individual or collective concerns in a very personal and human way. They’ve recounted personal experiences and anecdotes in their blogs, sharing their own stories and listening to the stories of others. By placing themselves in the center of the narrative, they seek to help others to make sense of the issues. They offer a very personal emotional connection to the organization, driving learning by highlighting their own thoughts and experiences, allowing others to learn about the organization based on their own first-hand experience. Their stories or blogs offer windows to view the cultural, political and emotional landscapes of the company, allowing people to share concerns and emotions in an open and honest way and to revise judgements as a result of this.

Used in this way, storytelling becomes a vehicle to enhance organizational communication, performance and learning, internally and externally, as well as facilitating and managing change.

The bloggers in Microsoft regard themselves as company evangelists and use the power of storytelling to support that role. In this instance, their stories and metaphors build context, dispel myths, create positive rumor and illustrate strategy. They allow their audiences to get a sense of the culture of the organization and to access normally tacit knowledge and data to enhance their perception in a positive manner.

Online storytelling

Blogs aren’t the only way in which storytelling is manifesting itself in the new digital era. We now have an explosion of online first-person narratives in the social media and networking sites such as Facebook, Bebo and My Space. In addition to this, we’re seeing most of the popular web destinations relying more and more on User Generated Content (UGC) to make them more appealing. A similar trend can be seen in corporate intranet sites, which are also inviting audiences to participate and contribute, to tell the stories they actually want to hear.

But in my opinion, this is actually where some of the inherent weaknesses of the storytelling medium are starting to become apparent.

Although stories can be engaging, at the end of the day, they are narratives which don’t necessarily have their basis in fact. Is it more important for a story to emphasize a particular point or promote a certain emotion, than to be accurate and stick to the facts? Given that the history of storytelling is one based on invention, entertainment and exaggeration, it’s easy to see how this communication tool, in the hands of inexperienced users, could actually cause massive damage to an organization.

How to get the technique right

First, it’s easy to get carried away and overdo the storytelling. This can lead to a dilution of the original communication, mixed and contradictory messages, confusion in the audience and a result which is the exact opposite to the one envisaged. It’s a fine balance to strike: contrived or manufactured stories will generate cynicism, mistrust and even ridicule, thereby undermining and destroying any positive emotional connection being established.

So, in the same way that a little knowledge can be a dangerous thing, a little storytelling can be equally as lethal. In order to reap the benefits of this often overlooked communication tool, its users need to be disciplined, they need to understand the tool they’re using and they need to be wary of the pitfalls in using it incorrectly or inappropriately, as it can cause untold damage.

Concluding thoughts

To sum up, storytelling is a powerful organizational communication tool, which is available to just about anybody. Executives and leaders can use the emotive power of storytelling to bring their business messages to life and engage their audiences in a very real way. It allows us to communicate business messages in a persuasive and compelling way. It allows us to inspire and motivate, educate and shape, engage and drive. It facilitates delivery of some of the key practices of exemplary leadership, namely in inspiring a shared vision, in providing context and relevance and in encouraging the hearts and minds of our staff. All this adds together to motivate the workforce to achieve the organization’s stated goals. scm

1. <http://www.london.edu/facultyandresearch.html>

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