

# HOW YOU CAN UNLEASH THE POWER OF STORYTELLING

by Ann Wylie

**[Famous communication consultant and author Ann Wylie illustrates why participating in Storytelling has lasting benefits to students who later enter business, the professions and community affairs.]**

*Sitting alone staring out her front window, 79-year old Harriet was isolated from the outside world. Once an adventure-some adult, her life had come to a stand-still -- no plans, no reason to get up in the morning...Loneliness had become her best friend...Then she saw an ad for senior aerobics at the YMCA. Frightened to face the outside world again,...Harriet talked herself into going to the YMCA.*

With this story, the editors of the YMCA of Greater Houston 1995 Annual Report take a tip from the fiction writers: They tell their audience a story.

If you're worried about losing your audience to fact fog, data smog and information overkill, follow the YMCA's approach.

Stories -- parables, anecdotes and narratives -- paint pictures in your audience members' minds. And they help them pay closer attention to your communication, understand your messages faster and remember your key points longer.

Storytelling works whether you're selling magazines ads -- or selling employees on the importance of embracing change. Successful communicators can also be master storytellers in speeches, brochures, publications and marketing campaigns.

People love stories. That's why Peg Neuhauser, who researches and writes about corporate legends and lore, calls storytelling "the most powerful form of human communication." Here's how you can tap it.

## **Build and Nurture Corporate Culture**

Fairy tales instruct, guide and give moral counsel. For example, they caution against judging by appearances: The frog may turn out to be a prince; the old woman may be a fairy godmother in disguise.

Business stories instruct, guide and give moral counsel, too. They teach people

"how we do things around here" by illustrating the culture through company lore.

One such business story -- the tale of the FedEx employee and the helicopter -- has become legendary with the help of management guru Tom Peters. In case you haven't heard it:

It seems a blizzard in the California Sierras took the telephone lines down, leaving the local FedEx office without phone service -- or any way of connecting with customers.

So a junior FedEx staffer decided to rent a helicopter to fix the problem. Without asking permission from his managers, he put the helicopter on his personal American Express card and instructed the pilot to fly to the top of the mountain where the failed equipment was located. There, the employee jumped onto the snow-covered mountaintop, trugged three-quarters of a mile in chest-deep snow and fixed the line to get FedEx back in business.

Now, I don't know about you, but I've never worked for a company where it was OK to rent a helicopter without permission and put it on my expense account. So how did that guy know to do whatever it took -- even renting a helicopter -- to get FedEx up and running again? FedEx executives communicate and build the company's values, beliefs and culture through storytelling.

"Our leaders are 'executive rhetoricians' whose speech is laden with stories about FedEx's work ethic and what made the company great," says employee communications manager Ed Robertson. "Over the long term, these stories reinforce our values and beliefs, officialize and validate the culture and mirror what's important around here."

## **The Ultimate Sales Technique**

The Longshore Media Development Group is famous for selling huge magazine

advertising contracts. CEO Spencer Longshore attributes his firm's success to a technique he calls "the parable process."

Instead of dragging out pie charts on circulation figures and percentage of market penetration, Longshore weaves tales about the audience. His stories illustrate how the magazine's audience members use the advertiser's products in their daily lives.

"Storytelling is the ultimate sales technique," he says. "Never in my life, under any circumstances, have I ever met a successful salesperson who wasn't also a master storyteller."

Consider Timex's "Takes a licking and keeps on ticking" campaign. It told stories of people who fell off tall buildings, got hit by grand pianos or floated for weeks on a rage in the Pacific and -- like a Timex -- survived.

One of my favorite ads from that campaign told the story of Mugsy, a tenacious, black-and-white Jack Russell Terrier.

It seems Mugsy was hit by a car, pronounced dead and buried by his family in a three-foot grave in the backyard. The next morning, the clan heard scratching at the back door. When they opened it, there was Mugsy, with a dirty nose, wagging his tail.

Like a Timex watch, Mugsy took a licking...but he kept on ticking.

One reason the Timex campaign worked so well is that it was engaging, fun and memorable. As Walt Disney said, "People spend money when and where they feel good."

## **Use a Four-Part Template**

Once you've decided to use more stories in your communications, the next step is to craft your anecdotes.

The secret to organizing your material may lie in a cartoon from artist Roz Chast called "Story Template." It shows four panels:

- **Once upon** a time.
- **Suddenly.**
- **Luckily.**
- **Happily ever** after.

Chast cartoon summarizes the key elements of a plot -- exactly what you need to write a compelling anecdote. Use your template to organize a narrative lead; a case study or testimonial; or a ministory to illustrate your point in a sidebar, caption or box.

You might also think of Chast's template as the "IPSR" structure:

- **Introduction.**
- **Program.**
- **Solution**
- **Results.**

Stories should be as long as your market, message and medium demand. But this simple structure is a good reminder that a great narrative can also be as short as four sentences.

### **Polish Your Leadership Image**

Storytelling is a powerful career tool. Remember, it's been the secret weapon of some of the world's most successful movers and shakers, from Abraham Lincoln to Martin Luther King to Ronald Reagan.

Using stories in speeches and meetings helps you:

- **Seem more** human, approachable, flexible and likable.
- **Overcome distance** between you and your audience.
- **Appear less** threatening.
- **Reflect confidence**, deflect criticism and show that you're secure enough to find humor in your mistakes.

So the next time you launch a communication program--or even talk to your colleagues and boss--ask yourself how you can make storytelling part of your approach. It could put you on the leadership track.

*(Ann Wylie works with managers who want to reach their audiences and with organizations that want to communicate their messages. For a free subscription to her e-mail newsletter, "Revving Up Readership," e-mail her at awylie@unicom.net. To order her handbook, "The Art of the Storyteller," send a check for \$17.50 plus \$3.50 P&H to Ann Wylie, Wylie Communications, 4618 Warwick, Ste. 7A, Kansas City, MO 64112. To learn about Ann's training, consulting and writing services, call her at (816) 502-7894.)*