# Storytelling in Business

Why Storytelling

Stories may be the most effective way to convey information to an audience while also building a relationship with them. In fact, the best business presentations are often simply a series of stories, each one making a strong point.

Choosing a Great Story

What is the best story to use for your presentation? It depends. Here are some thoughts on the different purposes and types of stories to help inspire your thinking.

## Purposes of Stories

Tell Who I Am: Share moments that made you who you are or that clarified your values (what others need to know to work well with you).

Tell Who We Are: Share values of your organization. What makes up the DNA of your organization?

Teach a Lesson: How you learned something through failure or success, how you mastered an organizational capability, how you overcame resistance to change.

Motivate Change: Create dissatisfaction with present, share dangerous mistakes in business, establish the case for change, create a vision for future state.

Change the Frame: Allow your audience to see a problem through a different lens, change the emotional climate.

## Types of Stories

Personal: Moments that made you who you are or that clarified your values. Moments when you discovered your voice or leadership potential.

Secondhand: Exceptional moments experienced by someone in your life. Something a family member, friend, or mentor experienced and what they learned/why you admire them.

Personal Business: Heroic moments—difficult but worthwhile struggles, extraordinary feats of a team, failures when you learned an important lesson.

Organizational: Dangerous mistakes in business, stories of how your company has handled these things in the past, stories of how the future could look: bright or dark.

Historic or Current Events of Significance: Inspiring moments of human triumph, such as the first expedition to Mars, or challenging moments, and what we have learned from these events.

## Remembering and Using Stories

* Begin cataloging stories from your life that might serve as powerful illustrations of your ideas.
* Keep a journal specifically for stories and entire interesting daily occurrences.
* Record other people’s stories that might serve to illustrate a point.

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Building Your Storytelling Library

Themes Library

Use the chart below to

* identify business themes that you need to address, e.g., overcoming resistance, building a team, or taking risks
* brainstorm a couple of stories for each of those themes.

|  |
| --- |
| Theme 1:  |
| Story—Short Description | Personal Learning | Business Message |
| **1.** |  |   |
| **2.** |  |  |

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Themes Library

|  |
| --- |
| Theme 2:  |
| Story—Short Description | Personal Learning | Business Message |
| **1.** |  |   |
| **2.** |  |  |

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Moments Library

Use the chart below to identify some of your favorite stories, and then identify the different themes for the story and the situation in which you might use it.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Story 1—Short Description** | Theme | Application |
| Theme  | Application |
| **Story 2—Short Description** | Theme | Application |
| Theme  | Application |
| **Story 3—Short Description** | Theme | Application |
| Theme  | Application |

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Storytelling Techniques

Present Tense

* Speak in the present tense to bring the audience into the action: “It’s the day of the big announcement. I’m nervous as heck.” You can also begin in the past tense and shift to present tense for the climax of the story.
* Employ a vertical take-off instead of leading up to the real story with a lot of runway time. Begin in the middle of the action.
* Tell the story from a “point of innocence,” as if you don’t know how it will end. This will keep your listeners waiting for the outcome.

Be Expressive

* Use your voice and body the way an actor would: be expressive.
* Show us what is happening rather than just describing it.
* Don’t be afraid to do a little acting when telling a story. Imagine you are speaking to a bunch of children rather than a group of serious adults.

Play the Roles

* Play the different characters in the story, when appropriate. Let your body and voice change in small ways to suggest how they looked and sounded.

Use Sensory Details

* Appeal to your audience’s sense of sight, touch, smell, hearing, and taste. Try “marble conference table” instead of “conference table.”
* Make sure to be selective with your use of sensory details. One or two are sufficient at the beginning to set the scene; use them sparingly after that.

Be Succinct

* Boil it down. It’s possible to tell a powerful, complete story in under a minute.
* Use “bullet phrases” instead of lengthy sentences. For example, the word “CRASH!” can be more powerful (when spoken expressively) than saying “Suddenly, the car I was driving collided with another vehicle.”
* Have a clear beginning, middle, and end.

Emphasize the Emotional Impact

* Slow down to accentuate and experience for yourself moments of real feeling: anger, fear, joy, a realization, etc. If you feel something, the audience will.

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* No story has drama unless there is conflict. For example, instead of saying “Company X’s costs were high,” underscore the conflict by saying “Company X was losing market share because costs were high.”
* Highlight the “emotional arc” of the story. How does the main character change? Is he/she different at the end of the story? What did he/she learn?

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Integrating a Story into a Conversation or Presentation

Subject Matter/Business Content

“Today I would like to speak to you about a new marketing strategy for our product...”

Transition into Story

“Let me share with you a story to illustrate a vision of how we can work together…”

Tell the Story

* Set the stage
* Describe the conflict
* Resolution

“It’s 2002. I'm out on the soccer field with my son. He turns to me and says...”

Connect the Story to a Teaching Point/Subject Matter

* Personal learning

“What my son said to me reminded me so powerfully that there is always a fresh, new way to look at any challenging situation.”

* Message for the group

“Ladies and gentlemen, are we willing to shift our marketing strategy in a whole new direction, to take a risk in the way that my son did? I certainly am.”

Reflection Questions

* When is the next opportunity for you to tell a story in a business setting?
* What type of story could you tell?
* What might prevent you from telling a story?
* What can you do to make sure this doesn’t happen?