

Good storytelling captures the audience more than facts and figures!!

Good storytelling is one of the most powerful and effective ways to get a message across and influence people. Despite the wizardry of the latest technology in multi-media presentations, people can best remember the points developed in a story. As Annette Simmons states in her book, called Story Factor (Perseus, 2002)

"... awakening the good in people is better done with stories, music and freshly baked cookies than flowcharts and PowerPoint shows..."

Over my working career it would be impossible to calculate the number of flowcharts, overheads and powerpoint presentations, etc I have had to endure. Infinitely worse is the prospect of those I will have to sit through in the future!!!! And yet, I am guilty of inflicting these types of presentations on others!!!!

The motion picture industry is evidence of the narrative appeal to the imagination moving people before facts and figures. But if stories are such powerful tools, why aren't they used more often in presentations?

I believe that it's usually because people are frightened that if they tell a story they will look stupid, corny or unprofessional; fearful that they might show their emotions and expose themselves; frightened that they may not be in control. Again, Annette Simmons sums it up well in the following quote

"...to influence you need to be emotional - which goes against everything you ever told about how we should act in front of the people we want to influence..."

In telling a story you need to connect yourself with your audience and make the story relevant to them. A story lets the audience decide for themselves whether they can trust you. Storytelling is a pull strategy, ie if your story is good enough, people - of their own free will – come to the conclusion that they can trust you and the message you bring. This is different from other methods of influence that are push strategies, such as persuasion, bribery or charismatic appeals. Furthermore, a story can give you space to think, allows curiosity to develop, helps make sense out of confusion and can give a better understanding.

One story I tell when I am working with a group that is stuck in one way of thinking is about the time I was driving our eldest son to school when he was around 10 years old. I was "half asleep" when he asked me: "What is the meaning of the word "virgin"?" I quickly woke-up wondering how best to handle this!!!! Thinking quickly, I opted for the truth rather than misinformation.

As I explained to him the meaning of the word “virgin” he looked at me as though I was from another planet!!!! After dropping him at school, I turned on the radio and listened to the news which referred to Virgin Airlines!!!!!!!!!!

Where was my mental benchmark compared with his!!!!!!

How often do we jump to incorrect assumptions about what someone else is saying!!!!!!!!

How often do we fail to get things in the right context!!!!!!

Furthermore, his mother is convinced that I have ruined him forever and his definition of Virgin Airlines is very different from his mates in the schoolyard!!!!!!!!

Remember: sometimes powerful stories can be short, like a proverb. Consider the case of a boss being excessively hard on his/her staff. Rather than tolerating the treatment or confronting the tyrant directly, which are either unsatisfactory or risky strategies, the employee might most effectively offer this observation:

“...the person who beats his horse will soon be walking...”

A very powerful message conveyed in a few words that is otherwise very difficult to illustrate in a flow chart or powerpoint presentation designed to demonstrate ways to manage difficult bosses.

Another example is provided by Annette Simmons

"... in both Heaven and Hell, people sit around a big table loaded with a feast, with each person holding a fork 6 foot long. In Hell they starve to death because they cannot get the forks to their mouths, and in Heaven they use the long forks to feed each other. This is a good story about co-operation..."

When employing the storytelling techniques, be careful that you do not appear to be superior. Some symptoms of superiority include

- "guruitus" (the expert who cultivates followers but excludes the “thinking” public)
- "self-righteousitus" (storyteller implies that he/she is superior to the audience/listeners)
- "storytelling voice" (an artifice such as sing-song exaggerated tone and often accompanied by over-acted facial expressions)

Some useful guidelines in storytelling: don't bore your listeners by telling a story that rambles or is pointless; if you suspect that you are boring people, either find a way of redirecting it or finish your story early; humour is a powerful way to connect to the audience but don't ridicule anybody in the audience (it is OK to make a joke or tell a funny story involving yourself); don't allow

nerve to make you speak too quickly; don't be self-indulgent; keep away from generalisation, hypotheticals and theories; if you are losing your audience, being silent can help the listeners return; if you lose your place in the story, admit it to your audience; don't scare people; don't make the audience feel guilty, it is better to leave them hopeful

Be brave and take risks!!!!

A compelling storyteller should be aware of the audience, be able to connect to them and be passionate about the values of the narrative's theme.

Never underestimate the power of a good story that is told well!!!!!!

Best of luck in spinning a good yarn!

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