

Story-selling: Creating and sharing authentic stories that persuade

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Purpose of the Study: To present “story-selling” as a valuable teaching innovation for adoption in any sales course.

Method/Design: This paper presents a brief overview of the problem/situation that sales representative are facing regarding communicating effectively and memorably in today’s busy over-communicated world. The paper provides an overview of the need for storytelling and the rationale for the story-selling teaching innovation. The paper explains the teaching innovation itself, reports on assessment findings, and describes how the innovation solves the sales representative’s communication problem. In addition, it provides a brief summary of the challenges encountered when using the innovation in the classroom, along with suggestions on how to overcome those challenges. Finally, comments on the versatility and adaptability of the innovation for teaching sales courses are provided.

Results: By completing the story-selling project, students now have the knowledge and skills to write persuasive stories, weaving them into almost any aspect of the sales process.

Value to Marketing Educators: Storytelling is a sought-after skill used by salespeople to effectively communicate, establish a rapport and build trust. Empowering students with skills in writing and sharing persuasive stories via this story-selling innovation will better prepare them for success in the real world, regardless of whether they are personally selling themselves or selling a product or service.

Keywords: Storytelling, story-selling, persuasive communication, sales representatives, teaching innovation

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PROBLEM/SITUATION

We live in an over-communicated world where we are constantly bombarded by messages clamoring for our attention. Sadly, for sales representatives, even the most passionate sales presentations pitching numerous product benefits can sometimes result in information overload for customers and prospects. The question is how can sales representatives communicate effectively in today’s busy world? How can their messages break through the clutter to claim the attention of the intended audience? And, how can sales reps get their customers or prospects to remember their messages and build trust in order to close sales and establish customer relationships? The answer to all of these questions is that sales representatives need to become expert storytellers or “story-sellers,” and they need to master the skill of telling persuasive stories. For college students planning a career in sales and even for those who are not, storytelling is a powerful skill that everyone should acquire because sooner or later, everyone must sell him or herself.

Stories are effective in gaining attention, establishing rapport, building trust and adding value in the context of sales. A recent article appearing in *Marketing News* presented 14 reasons why a company’s brand needs signature stories (Aaker,

2018). The first reason was that “stories are powerful” as they are more impactful than facts and can break through the distractions, disinterest and content overload, making an audience take notice, stay engaged and remember.

Salespeople use stories to establish rapport by emotionally getting in sync with the prospect who can relate to the story being told. They use stories featuring satisfied customers with testimonials to help build trust with prospects. Sales reps effectively use stories to demonstrate the positive impact of a purchase decision. These genuine customer satisfaction stories provide value to the selling context as they shed light on the experiences of satisfied customers. Sales reps may connect prospects with current customers who are willing to elaborate on their stories.

The power of storytelling has been widely researched and adapted by many disciplines, including psychology, sociology, communication, management and marketing. However, most marketing applications have been limited to advertising and branding (Pera, Viglia & Furlan, 2016; Gilliam & Flaherty, 2015; Pulizzi, 2012; Woodside, 2010). The lack of research on storytelling in a selling context leaves sales representatives at a disadvantage while they could be employing one of the most powerful forms of human communication (McAdams, 1993).

RATIONALE FOR THE INNOVATION

Storytelling has been around for centuries, dating back to pioneer days, before books and movies were in existence. The use of storytelling for selling enables sales representatives to build relationships with customers and prospective customers, stand out and above competitors and effectively sell products and services. Storytelling is on the rise both in face-to-face and online selling channels. Successful sales representatives can no longer merely talk about the features or benefits of their product (or service, event, cause, etc.), but instead, they must tell a convincing and memorable story that conveys so much more relevant information to the customer or prospect. Stories are powerful communication tools that enable salespeople to emotionally connect and engage with customers and prospects and provide real value. College students preparing for a career in sales need to learn how to create and tell stories that sell.

The goal of sales representatives is to communicate a convincing story to persuade people to buy their products/services versus those of their competitors. Although storytelling is a powerful sales strategy that can be taught, surprisingly, to date, few scholarly studies have been published on the topic (Cronin, 2016; Graeff, 2008). In addition, none of the current sales textbooks address storytelling techniques with any depth. Thus, to fill this gap, I have researched storytelling and I have created and implemented a “story-selling” project for my sales students to gain experience in crafting persuasive stories and sharing them with passion and purpose.

According to Futrell (2013, p. 297) “Top salespeople are great storytellers. Weaving similes, metaphors, analogies and parables throughout their presentations allows them to paint a beautiful picture of how their product will fulfill the needs of the buyer. This is a skill that can be learned with experience.” Empowering students with both knowledge and experience in creating stories that sell is precisely what my teaching innovation strives to accomplish.

OVERVIEW OF THE INNOVATION

I recently used the story-selling project in my Introductory Sales course as a service-learning assignment for the School of Business. Students were challenged to select an event, activity, offering, group, etc. (hereafter referred to as “story topic”) that they felt represented a success story worth sharing and write a one or two page *engaging* story documenting how and why the topic is both important to the Business School stakeholders and represents a success. When first introducing the project, I shared with the class a list of potential Business School story topics (internships, scholarships, professional development program, networking event, study abroad, various student clubs and organizations, such as the Collegiate American Marketing Association, Alpha Kappa Psi Professional Business Fraternity, Beta Gamma Sigma Honor Society, etc.). Students were encouraged to select a

topic from the list or suggest additional topics. Students submitted the topic for approval on a “first-come, first-served” basis, and no two students could use the same topic. Upon approval, students were tasked to research that topic via both primary and secondary research methods. To help students begin their primary research, I provided a list of key informants for each of the story topics, and I informed my Business School colleagues about the project in case they were contacted for an interview.

During the second and third weeks of the project, while my 20 students were conducting their story research, I presented information on writing persuasive stories to the class. This information included components that all persuasive stories must possess including the following: a clear objective, an intended audience, and a call-to-action; follow a structure with a beginning, middle and ending; have at least one main character about whom the story is written; be authentic or real since the assignment is not a role-play, but rather for a real-world client—the Business School; and attempt to spark the emotions of the audience. I also shared examples of persuasive stories and discussed the importance of using relevant images or photographs to accompany the story. The photos should evoke feeling or emotion, show action or interaction, emphasize primary benefits or the unique selling proposition, provide vivid pictures in which customers can believe and resonate and stimulate desire for whatever is being sold. I reviewed the required elements of their story-selling project, such as their stories should document the impact the topic has had on various constituents within the Business School, the university and/or throughout the greater community. Since the story is a research-based success story, their personal opinion should not be woven into the story. However, they may use testimonials and quotes from key informants who were interviewed in the story research. During the fourth week in the course prior to the assignment due date, I separated students into small peer-review groups where they took turns sharing their stories aloud and obtaining/providing feedback. Based on feedback, the peer review session was valuable in improving story quality and emotional appeal.

Students were given one month to complete the story-selling project. During that time period I provided my students with project components, required story structure, storytelling tips and a presentation guide. (See Appendix A.) I also provided my students with the grading rubric for this project in advance so the project expectations were clear. (See Appendix B.) On the project due date, all 20 students were required to orally share their stories with the class via a PowerPoint presentation and were graded according to the criteria outlined on the rubric.

ASSESSMENT & PROBLEM SOLUTION

The assessment measures for this teaching innovation come from two different story-selling project assignments in two different courses. I first introduced the story-selling innovation a few years ago as a “self-

selling” assignment in Personal Marketing courses. Selling oneself is not a natural phenomenon for many individuals as some feel as if they are bragging about themselves. Academic research supports that self-promotion often entails a trade-off between conveying one’s positive attributes and being seen as bragging (Berman, Levine, Barasch, and Small, 2015). These researchers dubbed this phenomena “The Braggart’s Dilemma.” I assessed and revised my teaching methods to overcome the braggart’s dilemma, while still upholding the integrity of the self-selling assignment. This led me to first embrace storytelling and introduce the story-selling project.

The before/after assessment of the self-selling assignment showed that when selling themselves, students project much greater energy and passion while telling a story than they do when speaking directly about their credentials and accomplishments. I witnessed improvement in the level of student confidence and an increase in the ease of self-selling when the students were presenting their personal stories to the class, compared with student performance before the story-selling project was used. Thus, storytelling effectively worked to help students overcome the braggart’s dilemma. More importantly, the students used the stories. Some posted their stories on their personal websites, while others used them during job interviews.

In my Introductory Sales course, assessment of the story-selling project for the Business School demonstrated significant value. According to the Director of Academic Administration of the Business School the stories will be used to enhance communications. Specifically, of the 20 student stories

that were submitted to the School of Business, 60 percent (12 stories) will be used externally (public website, publications, blog posts, presentations to civic groups and executive committees throughout the university), 30 percent (6 stories) will be used internally to promote programs and events to prospective and current business school students, and the remaining 10 percent (2 stories) will be used for anecdotal information. Please see Appendix C for portions of the story-selling projects that my sales class created for the Business School. In addition, positive unsolicited student feedback on the story-selling innovation included:

Authentic storytelling has enabled me to dramatically increase the social media presence of our university’s Relay for Life, as well as enhance the persuasiveness of the registration campaign. Since I began sharing emotional stories about why students participate in the Relay or who they Relay for, the number of people my posts have been shared with on Facebook has grown from an average of 50 people to 1500, peaking at 6200, and the page’s previews have increased by 300 percent.

By completing the story-selling project, my sales students now have the knowledge and skills to write persuasive stories and weave them into the sales process. Students empowered with storytelling skills and experience can create lasting impressions, build trust, and add value to any buying/selling relationship. As Table 1 presents, story selling may be incorporated across the entire sales process, including the Approach/Rapport-Build, Needs Identification, Presentation/Demonstration, Objections, and Close stages.

Table 1: Incorporating Story-Selling Throughout the Sales Process

Approach/Rapport-Build Stage
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sales reps should use prospect research to craft and tell customized stories to appeal to the unique needs and wants of the particular prospect with whom they are meeting. • Sales reps can use customized stories to gain common ground with prospects by revealing how they can relate to their prospect’s unique situation. • Sales reps can share their own personal stories to build rapport and to demonstrate that they are seeking a long-term relationship with the prospect. Personal stories permit a more open and friendly relationship between the sales reps and customers.
Needs Identification Stage
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sales reps may share authentic stories about the needs, wants or challenges of other customers that may encourage prospects to reveal their own needs and wants. • When sales reps tell “wish list” stories based on previous customers, they can follow these stories by asking prospects to reveal their own wish lists. • Stories may be short on details to encourage prospects to fill in the gaps. The story will gain impact because it will be created by the prospect, not the sales rep.
Presentation/Demonstration Stage
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stories may be effectively used to back up features and benefits and strive for the “wow” impression since authentic stories will be much more memorable than a list of details. • Tell stories that present a problem and a corresponding solution to engage prospects in the presentation/demonstration phase of the sales process. • Invite prospects to actively participate in the presentation by incorporating stories with questions for them to answer into the demonstration. • Use stories that build curiosity, spark suspense and arouse emotions that are directly related to the product/services being presented and demonstrated.

Objections Stage

- Provide success stories that depict how other customers, who had the very same objections as the current prospects, were satisfied or delighted with the outcome.
- Create numerous stories addressing the most common objections customers have had about the product/service being sold so that when prospects object, the sales rep is ready to respond with a tailored story about how the objections were overcome.
- Stories can be used to help sales reps overcome objections from prospects as stories often serve as mind changers.

Close Stage

- Success stories about previous customers, provided that they are accurate and can be validated, can be shared with a prospect to reveal the satisfaction level of other people who have used the given product or service being sold.
- Sales reps can share stories of “delighted” customers revealing the positive impact the purchase decision has had on the success of their business or their personal lives.
- Stories at this stage should generate strong emotional impact and convey intriguing thoughts that leave the prospect wanting more.
- Stories should be used to persuade at the close stage, thus a call-to-action may be effectively woven into a success story.

ASSOCIATED CHALLENGES & LESSONS LEARNED

I found a disparity when using the story-selling project in teaching my two different courses. Unlike self-storytelling in my Personal Marketing course, where the student *is* the sales topic and little or no research is needed, storytelling for a real-world client proves to be a greater challenge requiring much more research work. I reminded students that authentic stories, similar to testimonials, must be real, not make believe, in order to invoke consumer trust. Similarly, authentic stories should feature a real main character for ethical purposes. Mistrust is a potential risk of storytelling which may occur if the story is not genuine or when its claims cannot be validated. We live in a digital world where we can quickly verify the accuracy of stories. Thus, a lesson to impart on our students is that honesty and integrity are imperative in storytelling.

I had to provide networking assistance to some of the students in my Introductory Sales course to connect them with potential main characters, along with guidance on how to research their respective topic to delve deeper to locate the human interest angle for their story. Based on the perceived value of the peer review session, in the future, I will incorporate an additional peer review session during the first week of the project to stimulate story research ideas and draft questions for key informant research. Finally, I recommend industry

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storytelling books: *Persuasive Copywriting* (Maslen 2015), *All Marketers are Liars* (Godin 2005), and *Legendary Brands* (Vincent 2002) since the current sales texts do not provide adequate depth on the topic.

ADAPTABILITY OF THE INNOVATION

Stories can be used to sell anyone or anything. I have described two applications of authentic story-selling. However, you may use this story-selling project as a role-play assignment for a fictitious company, where the stories and characters could easily be created without background research. You may use the story-selling project in any level of sales course. Moreover, you may use this project to effectively teach key sales concepts and strategies, such as adaptive selling, inasmuch as students must learn that different stories should be created and shared with respective diverse target audiences.

As I have described in this paper, authentic stories can break through communication clutter, help salespeople establish a rapport, build trust and effectively sell. I believe empowering our students with both knowledge and experience in writing and sharing persuasive stories will better prepare them for successful sales careers in the real world. Thus, in our sales courses we should teach our students how to craft, tell and weave stories into the selling process.

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Appendix A

Story-Selling Project Assignment Details

Project Components:

- Title page: Must contain student name as well as the name and photo of your topic.
- Abstract: An abstract must contain a brief overview of the story, your opinion of the value of the story and a brief explanation regarding why you think the story is important enough to merit being communicated to select (identify the target market) Business School stakeholders.
- Length: The paper must be a minimum of one full page and a maximum of two pages in length, single-spaced, double spaced between paragraphs, one-inch margins.
- Research evidence: The story must demonstrate background research was obtained and the story must be authentic (real), not make-believe.
- Human interest angle: The story must have an emotional human interest emphasis.
- Testimonial: At least one testimonial should be woven into the story.
- Required story structure: The story must have a beginning, middle and ending.
- Story Title: The story must have a captivating title.
- Photograph(s): The story must have at least one relevant photograph.

Story Structure:

Beginning:

- Setting: The story setting and/or situation should be described so the reader can visualize and better relate to the story.
- Main character: The story must have at least one main character (a hero) and provide an overview description or “character sketch” to give the character some depth so readers can identify with him/her.

Middle:

- Predicament or Problem: Explanation of the challenge or opportunity the main character is facing.
- Narrative: Explanations of what happens.

Ending:

- Results: An explanation of the resolution of the main character’s predicament.
- Motivational: The ending should be written in an exciting and inspiring manner so that the story is a “success story,” as opposed to a drama or historical lesson.

Storytelling tips:

- Be creative, but your goal is to “sell” – convince the reader – not to merely entertain.
- Tell your story through action, not description. Write in present tense & use action verbs.
- Weave in suspense, surprise; arouse curiosity, stimulate passion and generate emotion.
- Write for the ear, not the eye. Write how you would speak – a conversational tone.

Oral Presentation guide:

- Target presentation length: three (3) minutes and five (5) slides with relevant images
- Be prepared, rehearsed and excited to sell your story with confidence and natural gestures
- Ensure good eye contact & engagement with audience (not reading note cards or stories)
- Maintain appropriate passion and tone of storytelling – arouse emotion and be persuasive

Appendix B

Story-Selling Project Grading Rubric

Student: _____ Story Topic: _____

Abstract (Brief overview of the story, target audience description, story goal or objective, described research methods, personal opinion of story, story value or importance.) [20 points]

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20

Story Title (Captivating story title that shows creativity and cleverness)

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Human Interest Angle (The story is authentic and is about somebody with whom you have some empathy)

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Story Structure:

Beginning: (Addresses story setting, character sketch, situation, relevant photos)

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Middle: (Addresses character predicament/problem/opportunity, activities/action, relevant photos)

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Ending: (Results, character resolution, emotional impact, persuasive, call-to-action, relevant photos)

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Testimonial (At least one relevant testimonial is cleverly woven into the story)

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Mechanics (Proper English grammar, correct punctuation and spelling, appropriate word choices, typographical errors, story uses present-tense, conversational tone, persuasive writing)

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Oral Presentation (Prepared & rehearsed, eye contact, 5 slides used, familiarity with story, effective voice, tone, pace, passion, appropriate introduction and conclusion, within time limit)

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Total Points Possible = 100

Your score: _____

[Comments below and/or on back]

Appendix C

Story-selling Project Samples for the Business School

Story-Selling Summer Internship Program to prospective Junior students:

“Chad woke up groggy on this warm summer morning. A tumultuous mix of anticipation and excitement for what today might bring had kept him awake for most of the night. His internship at IBM had so far provided him with many opportunities to observe other client relationship representatives, but today, he would have his opportunity to actively participate in the prospective client meeting. ...” “...Getting a good grade in school was one thing, but completing a sale with a client was a whole new level of success! ...”

Call to action: Apply for a summer internship so you can enjoy the feeling of success.

Story-Selling the Collegiate American Marketing Association to prospective members:

“As Jenny walks in the room, the sweet aroma of barbeque immediately hits her. After Jenny fills her plate with pure culinary delights, she navigates her way through the sea of people to claim the best seat in the house. Today is not just any day, today is the day when friends gather around a television to cheer on the underdog. Today is Super Bowl Sunday—but it’s not. Today is Ad Bowl Tuesday, a signature event for members of the American Marketing Association. ...”

Call to action: Join the AMA and enjoy the many fun events such as the Ad Bowl.

Story-Selling Professional Development Program (PDP) to prospective participants:

“... As Henry sits down at the table with the Wells Fargo managers, he remains calm and confident. He knows what he is doing and is fully prepared for any questions they may pose. His confidence is the result of the interview skills workshop that he attended.” ... “Not long after the interview Henry receives a full-time financial advisor position offer, and he credits his active participation in the Professional Development Program as the main reason behind his success.”

Call to action: Participate in the PDP so you can boost your confidence and be successful.

Story-Selling Student Collegiate Competition Team to prospective participants:

“...With a dry mouth and slightly shaking hands, Suzanne grasped the device turning to look at the judges. For a brief second, she froze—a pause that was unnoticeable to the audience, but felt like an eternity to her. Suddenly, she began to speak. It was almost as if she blacked out; her mouth seemed to be moving of its own accord as she effortlessly flew through the points she had memorized and rehearsed. She began to be more comfortable, relaxing as she saw the judges’ faces start to show genuine interest and enjoyment.” ... “As Suzanne was walking away from the awards ceremony she glanced down at the four business cards she had been given...”

Call to action: Participate on a collegiate competition team and reap the networking benefits.

Story-Selling Entrepreneur Club to prospective members:

“Jack had always wanted to be an entrepreneur. Like a caterpillar dreams of becoming a butterfly or a sapling becoming an immense oak, he had dreams of starting a business—of taking an original idea from his own imagination and building it from the ground up. He was on the right track, being president of the E-Club and close to the club’s faculty advisor, Dr. Kay”... “With the help of Dr. Kay, Jack and two of his fellow E-Club buddies started their business. ...”

Call to action: Join the E-Club and you may be able to start your new business venture too.