

Bright Ideas



Supporting Organizational
Excellence & Innovation

Telling your organization's story

"TELL ME A STORY." When I was growing up, this was something I said almost daily. I was surrounded by adults, some of whom were great storytellers. My favourite stories were the true stories of their own youth, some fifty years ago. My storytelling neighbours were not "movers and shakers" in the world, but their stories gave me new perspectives and shaped who I became as an adult.

Like people, organizations also have stories to tell, and others are eager to hear those stories. The audience may be employees, customers or clients, shareholders, potential funders, community members or taxpayers. Stories should be geared to their audience, just as my neighbours kept my age, vocabulary and experience in mind. Here are some key considerations in telling your organization's stories.

The story's purpose

While I've always loved stories for their own sake, I value the learning that often comes with them. I gain a new perspective on some aspect of life, or knowledge that I couldn't gain from direct experience. My neighbour's stories introduced me to a time when people lived in sod huts on the

prairie and got their water from wells they dug themselves. Stories may inform, explain and/or influence. They can create a bond of understanding and appreciation between storyteller and audience

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that improves public relations. What is the end you hope to achieve with the audience for your story? Begin with the end in mind, as Stephen Covey would say.

Structuring the story

Every story needs a beginning, middle and end. Good beginnings make people want to read or hear more. Some examples of compelling beginnings include

- A problem that kept good things from happening
- How things were once different than they are now
- How a person, set of values or event made a difference

In a good story, things are different at the end than they were at the beginning. The change may be internal, such as understanding something about oneself or another person or group. Or the change may be external, such as growth or financial success of an organization, a new direction, or greater efficiency, customer service or engagement.

The best stories engage the listener or reader to come along for the ride. Your audience should be able to picture what happened. The middle of your story must include *essential* facts or events without which the story is unclear or confusing. But it should also not include so many facts and details that the listener or reader is overwhelmed and tunes out. Although a good story puts events (including the reactions to them) in more or less linear order, life is not linear. Many people and groups play a role in an organization's story and you may need to include "meanwhile" statements for the story of organizational transformation to make sense.

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The end reflects the story's purpose. It states where the organization is now in terms of status or values as a result of the process or events in the story.

How is your organization special?

Every organization is special or unique in some way, often as a result of its values. Storytelling highlights important values that guide your organization's decisions and actions. The story's audience may not be aware that they share values with your organization. In organizational storytelling, values are a part of the key message or "moral of the story." The facts of what happened must be described in a way that helps the audience grasp this key

message about the organization. In the story line, the organization (or its leadership) makes choices based on vision and values. The options chosen in the story should not be obvious or ones that every organization would be expected to make. They also may not be ones that the audience expects your organization to make (e.g., choosing social responsibility over profit or customer needs over efficiency).

When you hear the tone

Storytelling differs from a report by virtue of its tone. Reports are formal and impersonal; passive voice is common. By contrast, stories are informal in style and, even if written, have a conversational

tone. All actions have clear actors, but we are also given insight into the thinking behind the actions.

Vocabulary may be adjusted to match audience characteristics. Jargon—and acronyms—are left out unless they are in daily use by your audience. My own trick for setting the right tone is to imagine that I am telling the story to my grandmother. Relevant photos, drawings and infographics can also enhance meaning and make the story more engaging.

Ultimately, a well-told story builds understanding and connects the storyteller to the reader or listener in new and profound ways.

From Where I Sit

Who do you think you are?: Genealogy & stories



There are two general approaches to genealogy: family tree-making and collecting family stories. While I have been known to engage in the former, my real enthusiasm is for the latter. There are, of course, people for whom genealogy holds no interest. I suspect that many of those think genealogy is about collecting names, dates and places. Pretty dry stuff.

I was introduced to genealogy as a child through my early love of stories. I was fortunate to have a grandmother who shared an interest in family history. She was also blessed with the kind of personality that invited people to share their stories with her. As a result, I grew up hearing about how my newlywed great-great-grandfather came to select and cut off a tree limb to carve a rolling pin so his

ill-equipped bride could make him the apple pie he desired. (I still use that rolling pin.) Or how his brother killed a neighbour with whom he had a boundary dispute when that neighbour broke down his door to have it out with him. The door was supposedly brought into court as evidence that it was self-defense.

The power of these stories was brought home to me when a fourth cousin once removed (and about a thousand miles away) wrote to my hometown genealogical society looking for court records to support the same story I grew up with. While the court records were lost in a fire long ago, the fact that this distant relative had heard the exact same story was proof enough for me of its truth.

Of course, some family stories are tall tales and, just like the celebrity genealogies on the TV show *Who Do You Think You Are?*, my mother and I have spent countless

hours in local history sections of libraries tracking down birth, marriage, death and property records to sort fact from fiction. In so doing, we discover their stories and how their values and experiences influenced our own story.



K. K. Biersdorff Consulting supports organizational excellence and innovation through an array of planning, research, communication and training services that take projects seamlessly from start to finish.