

How to Tell Stories

Most people probably don't realize that there is a technique behind effective story selling. Effective story selling is both an art and a science. In this section, I'd like to outline some of the key checkpoints for ensuring that a story is powerfully delivered. First, it is helpful to step back and take in the big picture. What exactly is your ultimate goal? Whatever your point is, you're going to have to really paint the picture for your audience. The more you can create the setting—the sights, the sounds, the smells, the feelings—the more your audience will be drawn in. Remember, you want the experience to become *their* experience—something they can readily identify with. As a persuader, you've got to take them there. As you prepare yourself, keep in mind all the ways in which you can really produce a mental and emotional imprint. You want your prospects to see your story in their minds' eyes, playing out like a movie. You want them to really take the story home, to have a place in their hearts for years to come. When you reach their hearts and involve their minds, you will be persuasive.

After stepping back to allow the big picture to sink in, you're ready to begin crafting your story. In this first phase, it is important to walk yourself through all the basic questions: Who is my audience? What do I want them to take away from this experience? No matter how basic the questions may be, don't shortchange yourself from having a good brainstorm. You'd be amazed at the brilliant ideas that come once a chain of thoughts is set into motion—ideas that would not have come if you hadn't broken from the routine and allowed yourself a good time-out. In order to get the ball rolling, it may be helpful to consider the questions at the end of this chapter.

We've already spoken about the great importance of engaging your audience as much as possible. One of the best ways to do this is to provide them with generous details. That is, make your story as vivid as possible. In the courtroom, lawyers make their stories so rich in sensory detail that the jury literally sees, hears and feels the event. The more concrete and specific your descriptive details, the more persuasive your story selling will be. Using specific details pulls your listeners into the story and makes the story seem real to them. Here's another twist on introducing as much detail as possible: Consider the

different ways in which you can capture your audience's senses. Get them to see, hear, feel and even taste and smell the elements of your story. The more involved your prospects feel, the more they will take the message home.

When you tell a story, your body and your voice become the stage, the actors, the costumes, the music and the props. For this reason, it is really important to take apart every element that contributes to the presentation as a whole and analyze it. The most obvious piece of story-selling equipment is your voice. It is the most direct and apparent mode of communication. I'd like to talk about using the *right* words, as well as *how* to use them. The right words are captivating; the wrong words are devastating. Effective words make things come to life, create energy and are more persuasive. Contrarily, ineffective words dull and alienate. Numerous studies have shown that a common trait successful men and women share is their skilled use of language. Speakers who possess greater verbal skills are seen as more credible, competent and convincing. Speakers who hesitate, use the wrong words or lack fluency have less credibility and come across as weak and ineffective. (For additional details, see the chapter on Verbal Packaging in Maximum Influence.)

As I previously mentioned, *how* we say the words we choose is just about as important as the words themselves. Our voice is a powerful instrument that can either motivate the troops or lull them to sleep. The next time you watch the news, notice how the anchors use their voices. News anchors are often trained to inflect their voices downward at the ends of sentences because doing so suggests confidence and authority. On the other hand, upward inflections tend to imply lack of confidence or doubt. One research study showed that judges communicate their bias and attitudes via their tone of voice. Juries in California were twice as likely to convict trial defendants when the judges already knew the defendants had prior convictions. In spite of the law prohibiting judges from disclosing such information, jurors still detected the judge's leanings based on her/his voice's lack of warmth, patience and tolerance.

Another thing to consider when telling a persuasive story is the pace or tempo of your speech. Pace refers to how rapidly you speak. Obviously, you don't want to sound unnatural, but research has shown that people who speak faster, louder and more fluently are perceived as more persuasive than those who do not. Stories that are delivered at a more upbeat pace are more persuasive than those that are delivered more slowly because the lively storyteller comes across as more competent and knowledgeable. You can slow down your speech occasionally for effect, but don't speak slowly on the whole. Otherwise, your presentation will seem sluggish. It is much better to keep up the energy and enthusiasm than to let it drop.

In most cultures, deeper voices, for both men and women, are generally interpreted as reflective of authority and strength. In addition, a deeper voice is stereotypically considered to be more believable and more indicative of an individual's sincerity and trustworthiness. For these reasons, listen to a recording of your own voice and determine whether or not it would benefit from being slightly lower in pitch. Even though it would require a vocal adjustment, a deeper pitch *is* something you have conscious control over. Other reasons for introducing new pitches into your speaking pattern are to prevent your voice from sounding monotone and to create interest. Remember, if you are not an engaging speaker, you will not be persuasive.

A huge thing to consider when telling a story is your voice's volume. Obviously, you're not going to be very persuasive if no one can hear you. At one time or another, you've probably experienced the aggravation of straining and struggling to hear a speaker. Before your presentation, test the room to ensure that you can be heard from all locations. Also, test to see whether you're going to need amplification. If so, be sure this equipment is available and set up prior to beginning your presentation. The converse is also true: Be sure you are not yelling or shouting at your audience. A loud voice is just as, or even more, aggravating for an audience as struggling to be able to hear.