

Story Selling

The Power Tool of Internet Persuaders

The Secret of Stories

Stories are powerful tools for persuaders. Stories draw your audience in and they help an audience understand and appreciate your message. We can all think of a time when we were in an audience where we were not paying attention to the speaker. We were off in our own world when, all of a sudden, we perked up and started to listen because the speaker had shifted to telling a story. If you stop and think about it, the best websites tell a story (written, audio or video). When we hear a story, we automatically tune in and want to know what happens next. Why do stories have this effect on us? Why are stories more engaging than facts, figures and statistics? Let's find out why.

One of my first sales jobs was in telemarketing. My office was in a typical tele-sales room with small stalls and a room full of high-energy closers. My mindset going into the job was: *How hard can this be? I can talk to people on the phone. I thought, I'm a people person and I'll have fantastic results.* In the past, I had been told time and time again that I was a people person who could talk to anyone. I was quickly served a large piece of humble pie as I tried to sell products to customers over the phone. The way this room worked was simple. The phone would ring and as you picked up your receiver, the operator would tell you a number. Each number represented a different product. We would sell real estate, weight loss products, stock market advice and other products.

One day, my phone rang and I was tired of not getting the sale. This time I was going to make it happen, I thought as I picked up the receiver. The operator told me the number and I looked it up. Weight loss was my assigned product. I was connecting well with the prospect, when I asked him about his target weight. Then there was a long pause. He finally opened up and told me about all the diets that had not worked and his frustration with his weight. I thought I was finally getting somewhere. After about ten minutes of conversation, the prospect finally asked, "What does my weight loss have to do with real estate investing?"

Sure, I could have told you that you need to know your audience before you try to persuade. I could have also told you that being in sales isn't the easiest profession. Instead, I told a story to capture your attention. By spicing it up with a little humor, I was better able to get my point across.

I want to talk about those key elements that make story selling so effective. When you understand what those essential story selling components are, and how to use them, you will be able to influence and touch people's hearts with the messages you powerfully convey. The first, and probably the most powerful, element of a good story is that it should engage the emotions. Facts and figures alone are much less likely to strike a chord with your audience than they are when coupled with relevant, powerful stories. When an individual's emotions are engaged, s/he will be more inclined to connect to you and your message. The more common ground you can establish, the more sense of connectivity you can create and the more attentive and receptive your prospects will be. Effective story selling is the difference between communicating and convincing, presenting and persuading, lecturing and touching their hearts.

A big part of whether or not your website is persuasive is whether or not the audience can believe in you. When you don't always have an opportunity to build rapport and trust with every individual in your audience on a one-on-one basis, stories can answer their questions about who you are, what you represent and what you want from them. If you don't answer these questions for them, they will draw their own conclusions. Why take the chance that they might conclude incorrectly? Use story selling to build rapport with your prospects. Do you want them to view you as funny, honest or down-to-earth? Identify the main points you want to get across and select your stories accordingly. Hearing your story might be as close as your prospect will ever get to a firsthand experience with you.

Meaningful stories inspire others to reach the same conclusion you have reached. People value their own conclusions more highly than yours, so if you can make your story *their*

story, you will be that much more persuasive. Human beings are drawn to anything that gives us “answers.” Use stories to help your audience answer some of their own questions. If you are successful in doing this, your message will grow and develop in your prospects’ minds and hearts. If they remember nothing else about your story and its underlying message will always get played over and over again in their minds.

Positively engaging your prospects’ emotions is one way in which story selling is especially effective when trying to make a point to an audience that might otherwise put up resistance. Stories are less prone to make others feel defensive or like you are critiquing or making demands of them. Instead of bluntly presenting your objections or differing opinions, bypass resistance and large egos by presenting your point of view in a non-threatening, even entertaining, way. Often people staunchly defend their positions not because they are so committed to those positions themselves but more often because they simply must protect both their need to be *right* and their embarrassment of being wrong. If you can avoid triggering this emotional defense mechanism, you will be amazed at how much more open your prospects are to considering your ideas.

Let’s discuss the crucial steps of effective story selling on the internet. To be a successful persuader, you must know which types of stories to use and how to implement them. In our next section, we’ll explore different types of stories and their uses.

Story Selection

In selecting a story that is appropriate for your website, there are three fundamental questions you must ask yourself. First, does the story fit your audience? How does it support and underscore your main message? Second, is it a story you love, have lived or have learned from firsthand? These are key elements if you want your story to be as compelling as possible. Third, can your story be related in a way that your audience will not only appreciate it, but also identify with it and be able to relate it? Remember that the more you can draw your audience in to you and your message, the more you can connect and persuade them.

Depending on the message you wish to convey, your story could take on any number of different tones or moods. Review the list below and check those characteristics that would be most instrumental in making your message more compelling:

Humorous	Contemplative
Witty	Disturbing
Spiritual	Fear
Surprising	Motivational
Teamwork	Heartwarming
Charitable	Enlightened
Inspirational	Scary

After you've determined the mood that best supports your message, you should have many different *kinds* of stories to pick from. The best kind of story is a true story, one that is based on your own personal experience. If it's not your own personal story, try to have it be the story of someone you know. Outside of personal, true-life stories, there may be times when yet another kind of story is appropriate. In these cases, you will again have many different genres to pick from. Consider the following:

Folktales	Fairytales
Myths	Oral traditions
Heroic tales	Love stories

Ghost stories Historical accounts

Bible stories Childhood adventures

Sometimes you have a pretty good idea of the type of story you want to use, but you're not sure where to come up with a good one. Again, remembering to always draw on your own firsthand experiences as your best resources, try this list to help jog your memory:

Embarrassing moments Proudest moments

Saddest moments Family vacations

Growing up years Travel (family, business, etc.)

Year by year events Sports

Dating Boss, workplace

Schooldays Hobbies

Disappointments Heroes (sports, business, family)

Photographs Journals, diaries

Victories Defeats

Failures Overcoming obstacles/challenges

When drawing on experiences other than your own, you might try:

Books Friends

Internet

Family

Movies

Observation

Once you've narrowed down the mood you wish to convey, the type of story you want to use and where you want to get it from, you then have to begin focusing on how to most effectively tell your story.

How to Tell

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.

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. Writers and 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.

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.

When delivering a speech, clearly articulate every sentence, phrase and word. When your speech is clear and coherent, it conveys competence. When your diction gets sloppy, on the other hand, it suggests lack of education and laziness. Consider how lawyers, doctors, supervisors, lobbyists and the like must be articulate if they are to professionally survive. Good articulation conveys competence, experience and credibility. Another practical reason to have good diction is simply because it is so much easier to follow than poorly articulated speech. People will be more likely to be won over by your message if you are easy to understand.

Vocal fillers can destroy your presentation, hurt your credibility and annoy your audience. Most people feel that they don't have a problem with fillers, but you would be amazed when you record yourself what words you use to fill in space during a speech. Vocal fillers include the common "um," "er," "ya know" and "uh." In addition to these, some people have their own idiosyncratic way of filling in gaps between ideas. Some repeat the first two or three words of a sentence until their brain catches up and they decide what they're going to say next. Others constantly say things like "OK" and "like." Fillers will never work to your advantage and they need to be eliminated from all speech. Here we see another reason why you should record yourself and assess your vocal abilities.

Besides words, pauses also add meaning and impact to your stories. The sound of well-timed silence can be more powerful than a dozen words. Because of this technique's dramatic effect, however, it can be overdone. Don't use pausing too much. If you do, it will lose its effectiveness. Besides highlighting important points, pausing also increases comprehension. When you pause in your story, your prospects have a moment of introspection, which helps them mentally and emotionally participate in the moment. Whether it is a moment to reflect or to enjoy a good laugh, a lull allows your audience members to process your story on a deeper level.

Silence amplifies all sensory and emotional details of your story. Use pauses to create attention, emphasis and mood. It is a common mistake to not hold the pause long enough. Be sure you allow enough of a pause that the full effect will be felt. When you do this, the audience anticipates and listens closely to what you will say next. As they come to understand your pausing patterns, your audience can tell something important is about to happen. This strategy is made even more effective when you combine it with pitch strategies. Be sure that as you come to the pause, your pitch is high, thereby building suspense and giving momentum to what will follow. Inflecting your pitch downward will defeat the purpose, providing a feeling of resolution instead of suspension.

Because of the many nuances that are conveyed through the different uses of the voice, it's always a good idea to record your voice and listen to it. What does it project? Do you sound compelling? Besides the overt message, observe the subtleties such as pitch, pace, volume, tone and articulation. Effective use of vocal variety catches and holds others' attention. If you don't like how you sound, don't despair; it is a common phenomenon. Pinpoint the precise aspects of your voice you'd like to strengthen then take things one step at a time. A handy tape or digital recorder may prove to be your best coach.

The thing that speaks the most directly, other than the voice, is your body. When you speak, words comprise less than 15 percent of what your listeners "hear." Your audience also receives information from your face, your posture, your hands, your eye movements, your gestures and your overall demeanor. Used well, these elements can give your story flow and add emphasis to it. If not used well, your body language can be very distracting and even cause you to lose credibility with your prospects. If you seem awkward or unsure of yourself, your audience will not receive your message as well.

If you are using a youtube type video, use gestures very carefully. Certainly there is room for spontaneity, but as a general rule, plan your gestures out ahead of time. They have to fit the story you are telling and not seem awkward or thrown together. Don't overdo it, but do use them to keep your audience's attention, to add drama to your story and to

underscore your key points. Think of your body as a prop that serves as a visual extension of the story you are telling with your voice. Above all else, your gestures must come across very naturally. Don't be robotic in your presentations. As with your voice, it's always a good idea to video record your presentation in advance or to practice it in front of a mirror.

The Four Essential Phases of a Great Story

We've just talked about story-selling techniques, from its preparation to its delivery. Now let's take a step back and review the structure or framework of every great story. There are four phases that are absolutely essential to making your story cohesive, clear and easy to follow. The first phase involves setting and characters. Your audience needs to have some sense of where and when the story is taking place. Did this story happen in the past or is it occurring in the future? What era is it supposed to take place in? Where does the action take place? On a farm, in the workplace, on a fishing trip or at a store? Immerse your audience within your story's context as much as possible so they can identify with it as much as possible. Remember, you must paint the picture for them. You need to take them into your story. With effective story selling, your audience is watching your movie in their mind. Also, take the time to not only introduce your character but also to really develop them. If your audience can't grasp who the characters are—their strengths, their faults, their dreams and what makes them unique—then they won't be able to relate to your story. When they know the story's characters, they will appreciate your story's climax when it comes. That's because they will have the necessary background information to draw from so they can connect with why the experience being conveyed would be significant to a particular character.

The second essential phase of a great story involves presenting a clear challenge or problem with which the characters must cope. Challenge generates interest and suspense. The audience is drawn in to wonder what the character is going to do about the dilemma. When presented with a challenge, it is instinctive for human beings to start guessing and projecting what they think the character will do, or better yet, what *they* themselves

would do in the same situation. The more the challenge is a situation audience members can readily relate to, the more it will hit home.

Why is this story-selling component so crucial? If there is no obstacle to overcome, no vision to fulfill and no questions to be answered, then what's the point of telling the story in the first place? Conflict and tension also create energy and give momentum to the story. The more engaged your audience is, the more eager they are to hear your story's outcome. Finally, effectively setting up the story's challenge will make the solution that much more powerful. In addition to making the story itself more powerful, the audience is able to reach a greater level of appreciation for and acceptance of your point. Create appropriate tensions when presenting the conflict so that the impact of the solution is that much more inspiring.

The third phase of an excellent story involves its climax, or turning point. The climax is the point where all the buildup has taken you. The momentum has driven you to this one peak point in the story. It is the cliffhanger! What will happen next? What is she going to do? How will he get out of this mess? By the time you arrive at your story's climax, you want your audience to be on the edge of their seats. It is important not to confuse this story-selling strategy with the preceding step, even though the two effects overlap. The climax of a story is a distinct point rather than a chain of events. It is the pivotal, make-it-or-break-it moment; it is the height to which all the momentum and action has led up to. This step in the story-selling process helps give your story form. Without it, your story will lack direction. Your audience will feel emotionally disturbed if all the activity rambles aimlessly with no climax and resulting conclusion. The climax is part of a clear path and it feeds off the story's preceding action. Its culmination, followed by its solution, gives your story great flow and energy.

Finally, your story must conclude with a resolution. If you've told an effective story, you have brought your audience through an emotional journey. They are now alert and attentive because they want to know how the characters they've identified so strongly with will fare after all they've been through. Your story's resolution is the moment where

the lesson is learned. Will your audience grasp your message, the moral of your story? Did they experience what you wanted them to experience; did they feel what you wanted them to feel?

As I've outlined in the preceding paragraphs, you will impart your message most strongly if a serious issue is clearly juxtaposed with a brilliant solution. Don't skip any of these story phases. They work together synergistically to produce a story that is powerful, compelling and inspiring. Often when we hear someone speak, we remember little of the discussion, yet the stories still remain with us. For this reason, you must embed your message, your main point, into the story. Deliver your message in a way that it will ring distinctly true and make a lasting imprint on your audience's minds.

Power Pointers for Story Selling

We have already discussed some of the essential elements to great stories: engaging emotions, powerful word usage, proper voice inflection, effective body language and clear structure. I'd now like to highlight just a few more key points besides those that have already been discussed to help make your story selling the best it can be. One of those points is the powerful use of humor. Nothing disarms and invites an audience in more than humor. We are instantly drawn to people we think are funny. We enjoy listening to humorous individuals and hearing what they have to say. Humor grabs attention, creates rapport and makes a message more memorable. It can also relieve tension, enhance relationships and motivate people. If you've got an important message to share, humor can give you a huge advantage. The actor John Cleese once said, "If I can get you to laugh with me, you like me better, which makes you more open to my ideas. And if I can persuade you to laugh at the particular point I make, by laughing at it you acknowledge its truth." Don't use humor just to get a laugh out of your prospects. In humor, there is so much potential for influence. Armed with humor, you can provide special insights or teach important principles.

Humor must be used cautiously, however. If used properly, it will help your audience to like you. If used ineffectively or inappropriately, however, it can be a big turn off. The

instant you irritate or offend your audience members, it's over. Nothing you say or do from that point forward will rectify the damage done. Worse, they'll always remember you as a bad comic. Be sure that you have good material before attempting to incorporate humor into your presentations. Also, cater your comedy to your audience. What would they find funny? What are some inside experiences they share that you could draw humor from? Use humor that will evoke chuckles and lightheartedness but that is still built on truth. It is a very wise idea to test the comedic waters on friends or family to make sure your humor *works!*

Another technique that is sometime used in story selling is the instillation of fear. As manipulative as it may sound, fear definitely motivates others when it is used properly. I would strongly caution against creating a false sense of fear, however. Doing so truly *is* manipulative, and by instilling false fear you will lose your audience's long-term trust. Use fear only if the threat is real and if it is in the best interest of the audience to be forewarned. For example, doctors sometimes have to be straightforward with their patients about the impending worst-case scenario if they don't get in shape. It's scary to hear, but the patient truly needs this information to be brought to her/his attention.

As much as we may wish it to not be the case, often it is only fear that will motivate and move someone off a path to destruction. There are less dramatic, but nevertheless fear-inspired, examples: Fear incites us to buy life insurance, to floss our teeth, to buy cars with airbags, to install home security systems and to purchase guns. Hopefully, fear will not be a persuasive tool you use with great frequency, but if you feel you can effectively use it to underscore a very important message, adhere to the following guidelines:

1. You must make your audience feel the anxiety and uneasiness that come from anticipating the possible, even greater, negative emotions (pain, grief, loss, etc.) that will become imminent if the problem is not dealt with.
2. Your prospects must feel not only that the fearful event is likely to happen, but also that they could be victimized by its occurrence. In other words, they must feel vulnerable.

3. You must provide a solution to the fear you instill. Give your prospects a recommended action to resolve the fear-inducing problem.
4. Your prospects must believe that they are capable of doing what is asked of them and that doing so will work for them.

Fine-Tuning your Story Selling

The use of repetition can also be very effective when telling a story. Repetition creates familiarity with your ideas, which in turn builds positive association. Repetition also makes a message more memorable. You need to repeat your message several times so your audience understands precisely what you are talking about and what you want them to do. This doesn't mean that you should sound like a broken record. You can repeat the message several times without saying the same thing over and over again. My motto is, when you repeat something, repackage how you say it. Each time you stress your point, use new evidence and new words.

Obviously, this technique must be used skillfully. When repetition is overused, it is likely to result in diminishing returns. You know how you feel when someone tells you that same old story for the tenth time, or when you've seen that commercial one too many times. If you've heard a story a million times before, you tune out and quit listening. Keep your point reinforcements to approximately three references—and definitely no more than five.

A common mistake with stories is they become too long-winded. Don't let your stories get too long, or you're going to lull your audience to sleep. Even if you think you're really entertaining, too much of a good story is still draining. I have heard it said that a two-minute story gives greater impact than a ten-minute one. Don't belabor the point if it can be said more concisely. This doesn't mean you should abandon the idea of giving your audience important details, as we discussed earlier. Of course, you must engage your audience, but be sure you're aware of this fine line. To be an effective storyteller, it's so important to always be tuned in to audience feedback, even if it's not overt. As you gain experience, you will get better and better at gauging your audience. You will then be

more readily able to discern how you're coming across to your audience. You'll also develop a good sense of pace and timing.

Hand in hand with not being too long-winded is this piece of story-selling advice: Don't bore your listeners! You may think these two concepts are the same thing, and they can be, but even a short story can be boring if it's not written well. Deliver a story you know your prospects are really going to love. Your audience is paying with either their time or their money. Give them your best effort in exchange for that payment.

How else can you bore an audience? By not giving them enough detail, by indulging in self-glorification, by going off on too many tangents or by delivering an indignant soapbox lecture. It is very important that you take the time to go through some of the brainstorming questions so your stories and presentations, on the whole, have structure. If you have a clear story-selling outline, your website will remain uncluttered and you will avoid these dangerous detours.

When you follow my suggestions, it will not take you long before you are a very skilled story seller. With these story-selling tools under your belt, you'll have that much more of an advantage when presenting your ideas, whether to a large audience or to a single person. And there is no better feeling than to get your point across in a manner in which it is understood, appreciated and persuasive.

Story Selling Questions

1. Identify one story you want to tell on your website.
2. How will this story help you connect with your audience?
3. What do you want to accomplish with this story?
4. What mood do you want to create after they read your story?

9. What is it about this story that will make your message clear?

10. Will your audience identify with this story? Why or why not?

11. What do you want your prospects to feel?

12. How will the story enhance your audience's desire to make a change?