



# What's YOUR Story?



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BY DAVID A. SALTZMAN

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*“The single greatest problem with communication is the illusion that it has taken place.” -George Bernard Shaw*

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Motivational coach Tony Gaskins says that communication is like oxygen – without it, things die. That includes our business relationships. I don't mean “talking”. We can all talk – sometimes too much – but that is for another paragraph further on. There is a difference between communication and talking and that is the first “secret weapon” of top advisors.

Talking is what happens when we show up and throw up. We have all been in “that” meeting, or business presentation, or sales meeting with a prospect or a client and we have *all* done it at one point or another of our careers. Folks who take this approach don't generally last in a business where real live in-depth communication is a major key to success. If you have been around for a while, odds are that you have already learned that lesson . . . the hard way.

**The question is, “Why do we have to learn it the hard way?”**

It is because we are hard wired to tell stories. “But isn't that a good thing?” I hear you say. Yes indeed – it is. But telling the right story the right way at the right time is the difference between success and failure.

## THE HISTORY OF STORYTELLING

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*“Stories are our primary tools of learning and teaching.”  
-Edward Miller*

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Storytelling has been a product of continual, generational change. It is entirely possible that storytelling even predated language. Paintings and etchings on cave walls were the ancient equivalent of PowerPoint. They didn't have

crazy animations, but they used pictures in a chronology to retell fables, myths, and history.

As time went on and language formed, telling stories around ancient campfires passed traditions from generation to generation. The best storytellers in every tribe were revered. They could paint those cave wall pictures with words!

Books – the later repositories of this type of information – were hand-lettered by scribes and, early on in the process, were the possessions of only the wealthy and powerful. In part, their power was due to the ability to hoard that knowledge and keep it from the masses. This was a terrific strategy that worked really well . . . until the development and deployment of the printing press by goldsmith and inventor Johannes Gutenberg in 1450. Then it all changed . . . again.

Over centuries, books and their knowledge became widely available. Those who had amassed power by hoarding books eventually lost their power. Anyone with an ability to read and a desire to learn now had the keys to *that* castle. As time and generations passed, everyone could communicate.

The real question is whether they communicate well, or poorly. And that, as Robert Frost said, has made all the difference. That “road” to good communication (to continue the Frost reference) is indeed, and sadly, “the one less traveled by.”

## STORYTELLING TODAY

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*“Communication – the human connection – is the key to personal and career success.” -Paul J. Meyer*

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Personal communication is difficult. Business communication is survival. How often have you attended a convention or a meeting that had a guest speaker? Think about those meetings for a moment or two. We have all been to too many of them to count, right? I know I have. And if you are like me, the Pareto

Principle applies. 80% of those guest speakers are . . . well . . . just dreadful. There is no nice way to say it! The other 20% are the ones you want to be. When you dream about giving a talk, that's what you see.

**The fundamental question is this: what in the hell is wrong with that 80% and what is *right* with the other 20,** and how do *I* get that “secret sauce” so I can be a revered storyteller in *my* tribe? What did those ancient cave dwellers and fireside storytellers have in common – what set them apart?

The good news is that it is the very same thing that 20% of business meeting speakers know. Good storytelling is an incredibly valuable skill with certain strategic, repeatable, and customizable elements – all of which leave the impression we need in order to propel both personal and career success.

## THE FIRST THING YOU HAVE TO KNOW

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*“The goal of advertising is not to convince people or make them think something. It is to make them feel something.”*  
-Matthew Luhn

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And what is advertising? It is (let's not always see the same hands) storytelling. And that whole “*feeling something*” stuff? That, my friends, is all about emotion. We think that we are wholly rational beings and that all of our humanness comes from being able to make reasoned and well-thought out decisions.

Psychologist Daniel Kahneman calls “BS” on that! Kahneman's lifetime of research makes it clear that we do not make decisions with our prefrontal cortex – that reasoning part of the brain – but rather, with our amygdala, the old lizard fight-or-flight reflexive part of our brain.

Over many thousands of years, we have become really, really good at instantaneously rationalizing those emotional decisions. Those rationalizations come from our prefrontal cortex. It is easy to see how we head-fake (sorry – I couldn't resist) ourselves into thinking that we reason our way through decisions.

We may reason ourselves into decisions, but I would like to suggest that rarely if ever can an advisor – or anyone selling solutions – reason a prospect or client to do much of anything. A recent ShiftShapers Podcast interview with a CFO made it completely clear that C-suite folks don't want to hear what you know until they hear that you know what matters to them.

**If you go into a meeting thinking that your knowledge alone will get you the AOR or the sale, your kids are going to be pretty skinny.**

## **BUT I HAVE ALL OF THE FACTS!**

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*“Stories are order-of-magnitude more powerful than sets of facts.”  
- David Aaker*

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And that, my friends, is where the problem begins. As Yoda said, “You must unlearn what you have learned.” Spreadsheets (or “spreadshits” as someone in one of my audiences said in a Freudian slip) will not get you to the sales promised land. And now you know why. There isn't a whole heck of a lot of emotion in a spreadsheet – even a really well-reasoned, well-formatted spreadsheet. It is nothing more than . . . a bunch of numbers . . . in little boxes.

Apparently, the numbers know they aren't going to work. Maybe that's why we call the little boxes “cells”. To be successful, we should really lock up the whole IDEA of spreadsheets.

Your story – the one with which you open and close a sale – has to be based in emotion. Recently, an advisor was trying to get a private school to understand how much they could save by taking their 700 employees into a partially self-funded plan. The number was well into six figures. SIX FIGURES! That just HAS to be compelling. But it wasn't. No matter how the advisor tried, she just couldn't grab the school CFO by the wallet.

She asked why such a compelling amount of money wouldn't get the CFO to “yes”, or even to a decision to move forward and examine the pros and cons of a partially self-funded arrangement. I asked her about the pre-meeting chit chat.

She thought I was crazy, but I persisted. Among those things the advisor had heard (but not listened to – more on that later) was the fact that *all* of the private schools in the area were struggling with attracting students due to ever-increasing tuition costs.

I asked her what tuition was at this particular school and when she told me the amount, I asked her to divide the potential savings by the dollar amount of tuition. Now she was *certain* that I had lost my mind, but the number she arrived at was 110. “What in the world does *that* have to do with *anything*?” she asked. (You may have caught on by now, but she had not . . . yet).

“What”, I asked her, “would that CFO say if you told him that you could bring him 110 new students?” Then, the light went on. The emotional problem the CFO was struggling with could indeed be equated to the savings the advisor was proposing. It just had to be transformed from a static number to an emotional number – and a (partial) answer to the CFO’s biggest headache. Yes, the advisor made the sale.

**You can’t understand how to hit that emotional chord without doing something at which many advisors do not, alas, excel.**

## “LISTEN” AND “SILENT” HAVE THE SAME LETTERS

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*“Most people do not listen with the intent to understand; they listen with the intent to reply.” -Steven Covey*

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The key to every successful advisor-client relationship is listening and asking strategic, open-ended question. Once you pose the question, you have to do what we do not do well . . . you have to shut up! That’s right. **Zip it.**

I know that you have all of this wonderful technical knowledge about how to help your clients lower their costs, create a healthier environment for their employees, build consumer confidence, provide transparency, and all the rest. Here’s a little secret: your client won’t give a flying fadoodle about all of that stuff if they don’t think you have listened to them in the first place.

One of the singularly best open-ended questions I have ever heard was written by Dan Sullivan of Strategic Coach. It is so compelling that an entire book was written around the question – and it is just one sentence! The book is called, “The Dan Sullivan Question” and is well worth the price. You can get it on Amazon: <https://amzn.to/2L5a8Xi>

The key isn’t so much in the question, but in the technique required to use the question effectively. If you ask it and then: *Just. Stop. Talking.* your prospect will tell you *everything* you need to know to be able to help them solve their problems. But you have to be patient. I have asked the question and endured a full minute of silence until the prospect started talking. Trust me – as an old radio DJ I can tell you that a minute of silence can seem like several days.

**Yes, it is excruciatingly awkward, but it is also exceptionally fruitful.**

I have had prospects give me relatively succinct, two-minute answers and I have even had one prospect who talked for 40 minutes nonstop. In each case I knew how to position my solutions so that they resonated on an emotional level. No trickery, no flim-flam, no bait-and-switch, just good old-fashioned listening – with the intent to understand.

## SO, NOW WHAT? AND HOW? AND WHY?

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*“The most powerful person in the world is the storyteller.”*  
-Steve Jobs

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Now that you have unlearned a lot of what you learned, what other skills do you need to apply all of this insight? The bad news is that there is quite a bit more. The good news is that it is pretty concise. There is a lot of noise in all of today’s sales channels and you need to differentiate yourself. You want to be the person making the big sales hits and winning the big clients. But how do you tell a cogent story that accomplishes all of that?

Think of all of the stories you have ever heard, movies you have watched, operas you have enjoyed, or even most popular songs. They all have a hero

(your client) who battles an antagonist (the villain) who keeps them from getting the thing they want. Something bad will happen to your hero if s/he can't get what it is that they want. They all begin with "once upon a time" and end with "happily ever after".

Ask yourself if your stories (a/k/a sales presentations, stage talks, etc.) have those elements. You have to be a bit more clever than Goldilocks or Little Red Riding Hood, but you get the picture. If you don't build to some kind of suspense you can't have the successful conclusion.

Become the expert every client thinks they deserve. Position yourself as that most powerful person that Steve Jobs spoke about. But . . . **how do you do that?**

## THE TOOLKIT

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*"If an expert says it can't be done – get another expert."  
-David Ben Gurion*

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First of all, to paraphrase Napoleon Bonaparte, you have to be a dealer in hope. You have to have what we call, "The three Cs": Confidence, Competence, and a Course of action. You, and you alone, have what it takes to get your prospects to the "promised land" of solving their problem in a way that answers and assuages their concerns.

One of the best methods of differentiating yourself is public speaking. Armed with the three Cs, you are unstoppable. But - and this is a BIG BUT, most people liken public speaking to a funeral . . . they would rather be "in the box" than giving the eulogy.

**What if you could learn techniques and hone your authentic story so that you could get past that paralyzing fear of speaking?** (*Hint: it is possible*).

You have the advantage of a large group of organizations in your area that are always hungry for public speakers. Getting in front of an audience – especially one where your key prospects or influencers are attending – gives



you a one-to-many advantage or you can create your own events and be even more strategic in targeting your prospect/client cohort. You can shape the message according to the audience, all by using small variations of “your story”.

### **Remember, you aren’t selling anything . . . except you!**

If the meeting is “yours”, how do you get people to attend? You use half of the technique that you employ for opening your talk. You pose a question that is compelling to the audience. A general business audience might want to know how to tame the second biggest item on their balance sheet and how they can own and control their own healthcare plan.

An audience full of those private school CFOs might want to know how they can trim their tuition costs to attract more students. Hi-tech or other hot industries that struggle with personnel might want to know how to create a plan of benefits that attracts and retains the best people. You have to sell the problem you are solving, not the solution to the problem.

## **INCREASE YOUR “ERA” – BUT NOT WITH A BASEBALL!**

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*“Never allow the fear of striking out keep you from playing the game.” -Babe Ruth*

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In baseball, ERA (Earned Run Average) reports the amount of runs per nine innings allowed by a particular pitcher. In our context ERA represents the three things you have to have to be successful in any endeavor – certainly in the benefits universe.

**The E stands for Engagement.** Engagement is the love child of a great story and your expertise. If you don’t know what you need to know to be an expert, get yourself schooled up. There are lots of folks who can help you with almost any aspect of your game. Check out the archives of my podcast at [www.shiftshapersonline.com](http://www.shiftshapersonline.com) and search for someone who can help you. One thing all of my guests have in common is their willingness to teach.

(How's that? A shameless plug for the podcast and a good deed in the same paragraph!)

**The R is for Relationships.** Use the tools we have discussed – good storytelling, emotional “hooks” in your story that relate to your prospect/clients’ concerns. You can’t build relationships without being emotionally attuned to these folks. Yes, they appear to be rough, tough, seasoned, ready-to-say-no-in-three-languages people, but they are, in the final analysis, people driven by emotion first and reason second.

As Zig Ziglar often said, “*You get what you want in this world by helping other people get what they want.*” Once you have the relationship, you want it to be long-lasting, sticky and valuable for you and the client.

**The A is for Authority.** We talked about that a bit earlier, but not only do you want to be “THE AUTHORITY” – but surprise, surprise – so do your prospect and clients. Have you ever heard anyone say, “My doctor is the worst in the city, but I really like him/her”? Of course not, any doctor anyone goes to for anything is always, “...the best in the city”.

**BE the authority. Use the techniques we have discussed here to help you get there.**

## WRAPPING IT ALL UP IN A BOW

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*“To effectively communicate, we must realize that we are all different in the way we perceive the world and use this understanding as a guide to our communication with others.”*  
-Tony Robbins

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Expertise will get you in front of the right people. Everyone wants to talk to an authority. A story that resonates with their needs will keep you engaged with the communities in which your prospects work. Listening to their needs and understanding their unique situation and framing the solution in a way that answers their concerns will keep you there long enough to build those relationships.

There is more to all of this than we can cover in a single white paper. The goals and objectives are easy to state, but the tasks you need to get there are standardized, though uniquely yours. There are six more steps to achieving confidence, competence and creating a plan of action that will help you get the engagement, relationships and authority you need to sell bigger – to play in the major leagues. That’s for our next white paper. Or, you can contact me to learn more now.

It is all about learning to answer the question, **“What’s Your Story?”**.



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