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The Public Relations Strategist — Current Issue

Story Time: Bringing Business Speeches to Life

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We've all been there: You're sitting in the audience, watching a business leader speaking in monotone. He or she is going through a detailed PowerPoint presentation without an end in sight when you suddenly hear, "You know, that reminds me of a story." You and the rest of the audience are suddenly awake. The speaker now has your undivided attention — he or she has finally made a connection.



You'll likely remember that moment, too — a day, a week, even a year after that presentation. You won't remember the Q4 R&D spend or the latest increase in revenues or the fact that you're now located in 42 countries — but you'll remember the story. Why? Because we are essentially hardwired for stories. We remember stories from our childhoods. As adults, we make sense of the past by telling it in narrative form. Don Hewitt, the late creator and producer of "60 Minutes," said the secret of his award-winning program worked on a simple premise: "Tell me a story."

But business — long the realm of analysis, numbers, and cold, hard facts — has long eschewed storytelling. And while facts are critically important in business, focusing on them is not always the most effective way to persuade people to act on your words. What's needed is actually a better balance between "left brain" facts, which are abundant in business, and "right brain" stories, which executives often hesitate to tell.

Yet business has some great stories to tell. Steve Jobs wowed students with his 2005 commencement speech at Stanford University. He began by saying, "Today, I want to tell you three stories from my life . . ." He then detailed his early years as well as how his cancer diagnosis affected his view of life.

Other CEOs have also been consummate storytellers: In his autobiography, Jack Welch tells a story about how he literally blew up a GE lab early in his career. Oracle co-founder and CEO Larry Ellison tells of how he created a dummy website called "HeyIdiot.com" at the height of the Internet boom and actually heard from people interested in investing. American business magnate T. Boone Pickens, well into his 60s and already hugely successful, tells of how he twice failed the exam to become a licensed commodities pool operator.

Using stories effectively

Here are tips for spicing up your next business presentation:

- **Tell your own stories first.** You've experienced your own stories firsthand, so who better to recount them with color and enthusiasm? Are sales up compared with the previous year? That's great. Then talk about your last sales call to illustrate why sales are increasing. Odds are that your audience will remember the story before they remember the numbers.
- **Be a reporter.** If you don't have any personal stories of your own, then ask around to see if others within your organization would be willing to share their anecdotes.

I recently wrote a speech for my CEO to deliver to one of our company's sales forces. Rather than reciting more statistics about the state of the market, I picked up the phone and called people in the company. One executive told me that the company was going to honor several individuals in the audience for their sales results.

One salesperson's story caught my attention: Earlier in the year, she took over a new sales territory. Instead of struggling in an already-tough market, she overcame these challenges and enjoyed a banner year. Her story illustrated the can-do attitude that our CEO wanted others to emulate and made the speech more memorable. The

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