

# Creating compelling stories to help promote your business

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# Creating compelling stories to help promote your business

## The positive impact created by using stories

Psychology studies show how stories deeply influence our attitudes, beliefs and the decisions people make. Yet despite the importance that persuasion plays in ensuring you get the outcome you want for your business, most business owners struggle to communicate the value of their offering clearly.

Normal business practice is to believe that only rational, fact based communications will turn a prospect into a customer. The common thought is that a prospect will view all the hard evidence about the product or service and then make a decision after weighing up all those facts. But the simple truth is that we are motivated into action by our emotions, not rational facts.

I choose my words carefully when I say that this is not just for the B2C sale, this applies to the B2B sales as well (Research carried out by Google revealed that B2B brands provoke an emotional connection with more than 50% of their customers. That's compared to 10-40% for B2C). The general assumption is that all business decisions are totally rational and only made after careful consideration of the supported evidence. This is simply not true, a decision, big or small, personal or business, is heavily influenced by emotions and the way something, or someone makes us feel. We 'feel' something before we understand something. We can quickly post-rationalise our decisions and provide a perfectly plausible narrative to justify why we made the choices we did, but the real decisions we make are made in the part that handles emotion.

Our feelings, our emotions play a huge part in influencing our day-to-day decisions. Stories hold the power to create emotions and in turn influence our attitudes, beliefs and the decisions people make. Without emotion, we are biologically incapable of making decisions. Rational facts delivered in isolation are often considered dull, easily forgotten and at worst can be viewed as a threat. But if you take the facts and envelop them with stories they can be transformed into something that provides context, sustains attention and makes them more persuasive.

## Why aren't we using more stories in business?

Intuitively, most of us already know that stories are a powerful and memorable way to communicate our business ideas and have probably seen footage of great leaders tell a compelling story that changes the minds of many. Unfortunately the main barrier to using stories in business is not a lack of stories for a business to tell, it is simply that most people do not know or have a process for creating stories.

A lot of the information available on how to write a business story is either too complex to understand (unless you are a Hollywood writer) or oversimplified to the point that it only offers a few hints on the subject. What business owners need is a simple way to capture and use stories to benefit their cause.

This guide will walk you through a simple and effective way for you to find and tell your business stories.

## Ideas for situations to use your story

Face to face meetings, pitches, social media, presentations, talks, attracting new hires and new business meetings. There are many more circumstances where a story will help make you memorable and, I am sure, you can think of many more right now. The process I will use to help you find and tell business stories will work in all the above situations.

## What story should you tell first?

Here's a hint to help you find your first story to tell. Don't go looking for stories, look for challenges that you have had to overcome. These are the places that you will find your most compelling stories. Maybe your business is the result of a problem that frustrated you and you started the business to right that wrong? Maybe you struggled to raise finance? Maybe your first product failed? Those challenges contain the essential ingredients that make great stories.

If you still need some inspiration then take a look at the list below, maybe something here will help.

### 1) Your Purpose Story

So many companies talk about what they do and how they do it but miss out WHY they do it. Capturing the business's 'why' is often where a compelling story can be found. Use your 'Why' to explain the purpose of your company.

### 2) Your Risk Story

Business leaders take risks and every risk has its story, be it success or failure. Either way, these stories tell us about the kind of leader who is at the helm so choose this story if you want to demonstrate how you operate under pressure and how you manage risk.

### 3) Your Vision Story

Giving people a window through which to view how your company will look in the future will go a long way to helping them understand your strategy and what part they will play in realising your goals. A vision story is the perfect way to make your thinking tangible.

### 4) Your Customer Story

Get your customers to do the heavy lifting by sharing their stories of where they see the value you add. When we hear these told from the customer's point of view they become more authentic and therefore people are more willing to share them.

### 5) Your Launch Story

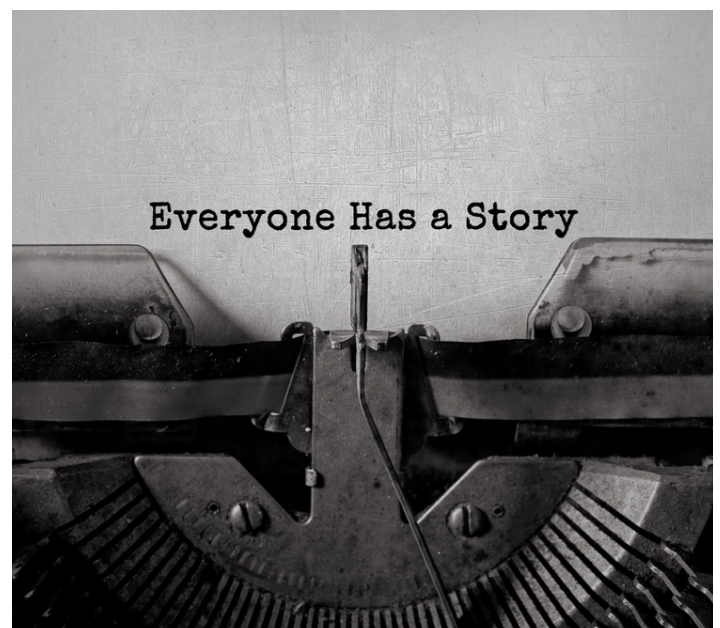
Whether your business is an e-tailer, a tech start-up or a global enterprise you had a launch: a deadline, a day when you went live. Share the story of your journey from humble beginnings and bring to life what you are capable of.

### 6) Your Founder Story

So many businesses fail to mention the founders, even when they are still running the business. You may be humble, but people want to hear the story of how and why you started the business, the hurdles you faced and what you learned on the journey.

### 7) Your Leadership Story

Your leadership story can help you guide an organisation. So at your next boardroom meeting you can use the power of story to demonstrate how your leadership skills have avoided potential storms, created new opportunities and put the organisation in better stead.



## A simple 5-step process for creating stories

So let's get started. You have chosen your idea from the list or you have an idea of your own and you are ready to bring it to life.

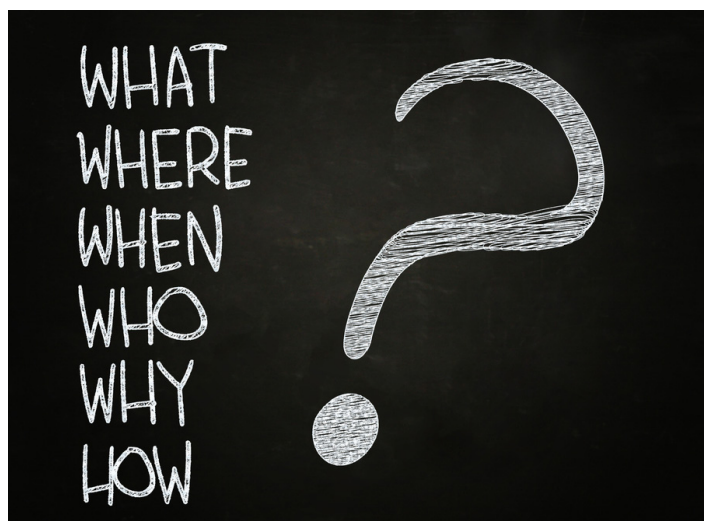
### The 5 W's (Getting the facts of your story)

For this first step of the process, you are going to provide five answers to five questions. There will be time to add additional detail and finesse it later. For now, all you need to provide is the higher-level answers to the following five questions: who, what, when, where, why?

If you feel an urge to provide every detail as you go about answering the questions that follow then please, for your own sanity, don't. Simple answers to simple questions are all that is required.

- Who (or what) is your story about?
- What happened?
- When did it take place?
- Where did it take place?
- Why did it happen?

In everyday life, we pick up the kids from school, wait for a train and answer scores of emails. Storytelling demands that we dismiss irrelevant interactions. The parts you must edit out are those that do not add context to the story or move it towards the goal. So work through your answers to the five questions and strike through anything that does



not add context, provide a sense of where and when the story took place, explain why an event occurred, or move the story forward towards the goal.

### The 4 P's (The stuff that creates interest)

When a news editor first told me that you could boil down the things people are interested in to just four categories, I was suspicious. My first thought was that everyone is different and as such they have personal likes and dislikes. That news editor shared with me these four categories and I have used this method to ensure my clients' work gets noticed.

The 4P's that arouse curiosity and cause people to want to know more are Princes, Purses, Pets, and Places. The 4P's do not need to be the subject of your story but if your story can include one or more of the 4P's then that's great. Let's look at each one of these 4P's in more detail.

**Princes:** A Prince is anyone or anything you can name, but you don't need to explain. Richard Branson is a Prince: you do not need to mention that he is the founder of Virgin. Google is also a Prince. It's not a person, but things can be Princes too: you can just say Google and you do not need to go into detail about how it provides Web-related services and products. Within your own business, your CEO is a Prince as is the receptionist. A Prince is anyone or thing that you can name to your audience, but you don't need to explain. Is there a Prince in your story? Someone or something that is familiar and your audience will immediately recognise without prompting?

**Pets:** We love our pets more than our neighbours and in some cases, our own flesh and blood. They star in films, TV, adverts, magazines and they dominate the Web. Their cuddly little faces looking all cute. Owners let them sleep in their beds, feed them food that is equal or better to their own and spend a fortune on them when they fall ill. A vet once told me how a customer re-mortgaged her house to pay for the £15,000 surgery bill for her sick dog. The pooch died one week later, but the owner had no regrets forking out the cash; she said it had been worth every penny to get to spend another week with her companion. So don't underestimate the power of cute animals.



**Purses:** In the western world we are obsessed with money: complaining about it; dreaming of it; spending it; making it; losing and winning it. The more extreme the value, high or low, the more people want to hear about it. From Carolyn Davidson, who was allegedly paid less than £25 for creating the infamous Nike Swoosh (she was later handed an envelope stuffed with Nike stock as a show of gratitude), to the Malevich geometric abstract art consisting of not much more than brightly coloured shapes on a canvas selling at a Sotheby's auction for £40 million. The world loves a story of an entrepreneur that risks everything and wins it all. Equally they like to hear about the billionaire who bets everything on black only to watch it come up red.

**Places:** Editors know the value of presenting a local angle to a story; this is because the place you were born, live, work, spend your holidays, are all incredibly relevant to you. Places provide context – you can just say the name of some locations and it will conjure up strong emotive images: An evening in Paris, Christmas in New York or a Caribbean sunset. Equally you can use localised places that are familiar to the audience such as the town your business is located, the boardroom or the local coffee shop. So take a moment to see if a location can be used to add context to your story.

The 4P's provide a simple way for you to sanity check your work and ensure you haven't missed out the stuff that, although people seldom admit it, they like to hear about.

The next stage is to organise the content you have so far into the tried and tested three-act structure.

### The 3 Acts (how to organize your 5W's into a story plot)

Once you understand the principles of constructing a story, it becomes easy to create, find, remember and use them for your own ends. Stories contain three distinct parts and follow a very definite sequence, which are commonly known as the 3 Acts. The people, places and subject matter may change but the basic three-act structure remains the same.

### Act 1: An inciting incident, otherwise known as the challenge:

The objective of Act 1 is to gain the interest of your audience. To do this, you must set out a problem, obstacle or challenge and introduce the person who will attempt to overcome it. By introducing a problem or obstacle, you will set in motion a natural desire driven by curiosity to hear the outcome. Now you have the audience's attention you can provide some additional information that will help provide context.

From your 5W's you can include in Act 1 the Who? Why (that's the inciting incident/problem/obstacle)? When? and Where? Saving the 'What happened?' for Act 2.

**Act 2: Conflict or struggle:** Stories come to life when there is a conflict or struggle. For example, the bank that refused you a loan starving you of progression, a technological challenge that seemed impossible to solve, or a looming deadline. The conflict or struggle provides the resistance for the hero to push back against thus creating tension, and nothing holds an audience's attention quite like tension. If they were keen to hear what would happen next during act one, now with the added conflict you should have their undivided attention as they fully engage in your story, curious to hear the resolve. Look at the facts you gathered in the 5W's – can you see the conflict? If not then go back over the questions and add it in. Don't tell me you don't have any – I have never met anyone in business that hasn't faced challenges; those challenges are what you are looking for.



**Act 3: The Resolve:** The resolve closes the story after you overcome the struggle that took place in Act 2. Act 3 is where you demonstrate to your audience what you learned as a result of overcoming the struggle. The resolve can also be used to highlight what the world will look like once you've achieved your vision. When you are writing Act 3 ask yourself, as a result of the struggle during Act 2, what's different?

### The 2 States (Injecting some emotion into your story)

It is an unarguable fact that you can't be in both a positive and a negative state of mind at exactly the same time. The brain can only be in one state at any single moment; it can, however, move at speed between states that are poles apart.

Stories are the same: they cannot be happy and sad at exactly the same moment in the story, but they can quickly flip from one emotional state to another. By switching between two states, your story will add emotion and keep the audience engaged.

The good news is that it's not difficult to find those two states. They are simply the opposite of whatever the current state is at any given point in the story: happy switches to sad, success to failure, up becomes down, strong to weak, assurance gives way to fear, laughter turns to tears, hot to cold, fast to slow and what is 'on' is suddenly 'off'.

The story about a rich man that stays rich is not much of a story at all, yet a rich man who loses everything and becomes poor, or a poor man who creates riches, contains the change of state that creates engaging content. Your story can switch states as many times as you see fit, but be sure to allow enough time for your audience to tune into the new state.

By flipping between the two states you will move people between emotions and, as a result, make your story more engaging.

Tease out both the negative and positive aspects of your story and sprinkle them through the second act to provide the state changes.

All that is left to do is to create a headline for your story. When we share stories we don't really need a headline to announce it. Online however, we have the opportunity for a subject line, status update or title, all of which can be used to entice people to read your story. The more compelling the headline, the more likely you are to grab attention. So it goes without saying that you need one killer headline.

### The 1 Killer Headline (How to attract people to your story)

How many books have you purchased, video links clicked on and blog posts opened based solely on the title? Now consider the huge amount of very similar content you must have ignored because the headline failed to grab your attention.

The role of the headline is to grab the interest of that audience as fast as possible. To grab attention, the headline must go some way to explaining what the story is about. It's a big ask, but, fortunately, there is a simple way to arrive at the solution.

The easiest way to create a killer headline is to start with the thinking that there are only three different types of headline. They are the Promise headline, the Intrigue headline and the News headline.

Let's look at all three in more detail.

**1 - The Promise Headline:** The first type of headline is the 'Promise' headline and it offers the reader a very clear promise. Example: 'Cure for Baldness Found'. The Promise headline should be uncluttered, shouting very proudly exactly what the promise is and used when your story holds the answer to a specific problem.

**2 - The Intrigue Headline:** The second type of headline is the 'Intrigue' headline that will draw people in as they become fascinated to understand the story behind the headline. Example: 'Man Bites Dog'

The Intrigue headline can be used when your story has an element of curiosity about it.

**3 - The News Headline:** The third type of headline is the 'News' headline and is defined as: new and interesting. Example: 'First Humans Land on Mars'. It should be journalistic in its approach, true, clear and packed with urgency. Use it when your story addresses a new invention, approach or idea.

## Set your story free

Now you need to start telling your story. Don't hide it away; tell it so that it can travel far, fast and for free. You will be surprised how even in the most rational business situations a story is always welcomed. Especially when it helps to make a point. So find one challenge you have faced, take note of the ups and downs you went through to overcome the challenge as well as what you learned from going through that challenge. Look to see if you can include any of the 4P's (princes, purses, pets or places) and then practice telling your story. Once you have mastered the art of telling your story using the three-act structure (challenge, struggle and resolve) you will find it easier to not only create more stories but also remember and reuse business stories you hear or read elsewhere.



## About the author

David Sloly started his career with £70 and a fascination for all things technology. Four years later he sold his small communications business and went travelling. Whilst exploring the world, he became fascinated by stories and on his return studied with the BBC as a trainee journalist where he learnt the art of finding and telling other people's stories.

After a brief spell at BBC Greater London Radio, as it was known then, David moved to the UK's first independent production company where he began writing and producing content for MTV, Virgin and the BBC. In 1997, David joined Kiss FM, a small dance music radio station in London and was charged with making the station famous. David used the power of stories to capture the imagination of the youth market. The content went viral, the audience tripled and David won a whole load of awards.

In 2001, David became interested in advertising and, after winning a place on the prestigious D&AD course; he shifted his communications skills to advertising and marketing. He took a role at an international B2B technology-marketing agency and worked creatively across global brands including Microsoft, Google, 3M and Dell, again picking up some major industry awards along the way. David was later promoted to creative director and then executive creative director, where he led the agency in the role story plays in brand marketing. As data and technology became more prevalent to marketing, he began to use stories to bring meaning to data and to enhance the customer journey for automated marketing campaigns.

In 2013, David joined forces with a previous agency colleague, Harvey Steed, and together they established HarveyDavid, a modern B2B marketing agency.

Need help finding and creating your story? David Sloly has helped companies from start-ups to multinationals find and tell their stories.

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