



INDUSTRY POV

IMAGE: **GEORGE BAILEY/SHUTTERSTOCK**

# WHY STORYTELLING IS THE ULTIMATE WEAPON

BY: **JONATHAN GOTTSCHALL**

Jonathan Gottschall, author of *The Storytelling Animal*, says science backs up the long-held belief that story is the most powerful means of communicating a message.

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In business, storytelling is all the rage. Without a compelling story, we are told, our product, idea, or personal brand, is dead on arrival. In his book, *Tell to Win*, Peter Guber joins writers like Annette Simmons and Stephen Denning in evangelizing for the power of story in human affairs

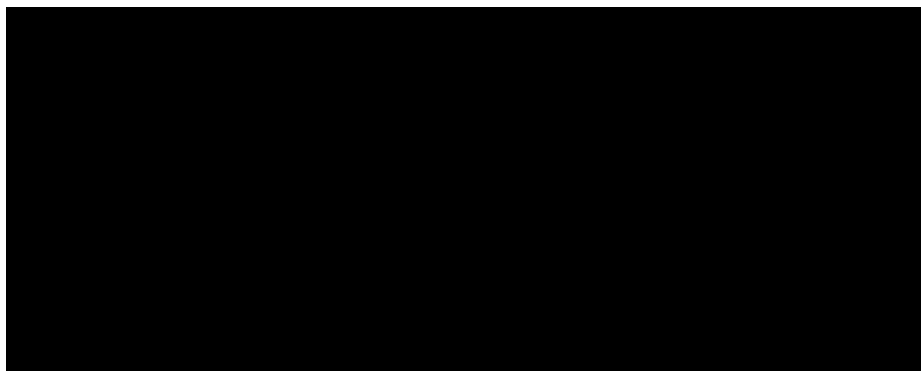
generally, and business in particular. Guber argues that humans simply aren't moved to action by "data dumps," dense PowerPoint slides, or spreadsheets packed with figures. People are moved by emotion. The best way to emotionally connect other people to our agenda begins with "Once upon a time..."

Plausible enough. But claims for the power of business storytelling are usually supported only with more story. Guber, for example, backs up his bold claims with accounts of how he, or one of his famous friends, told a good story and achieved a triumph of persuasion. But anecdotes don't make a science. Is "telling to win" just the latest fashion in a business world that is continually swept with new fads and new gurus pitching the newest can't-miss secret to success? Or does it represent a real and deep insight into communications strategy?

I think it's a real insight. I'm a literary scholar who uses science to try to understand the vast, witchy power of story in human life. Guber and his allies have arrived through experience at the same conclusions science has reached through experiment.

Until recently we've only been able to speculate about story's persuasive effects. But over the last several decades psychology has begun a serious study of how story affects the human mind. Results repeatedly show that our attitudes, fears, hopes, and values are strongly influenced by story. In fact, fiction seems to be more effective at changing beliefs than writing that is specifically designed to persuade through argument and evidence.

What is going on here? Why are we putty in a storyteller's hands? The psychologists Melanie Green and Tim Brock argue that entering fictional worlds "radically alters the way information is processed." Green and Brock's studies shows that the more absorbed readers are in a story, the more the story changes them. Highly absorbed readers also detected significantly fewer "false notes" in stories--inaccuracies, missteps--than less transported readers. Importantly, it is not just that highly absorbed readers detected the false notes and didn't care about them (as when we watch a pleasurable idiotic action film). They were unable to detect the false notes in the first place.



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And, in this, there is an important lesson about the molding power of story. When we read dry, factual arguments, we read with our dukes up. We are critical and skeptical. But when we are absorbed in a story we drop our intellectual guard. We are moved emotionally and this seems to leave us defenseless.

This is exactly Guber's point. The central metaphor of *Tell to Win* is the Trojan Horse. You know the back story: After a decade of gory stalemate at Troy, the ancient Greeks decided they would never take Troy by force, so they would take it by guile. They pretended to sail home, leaving behind a massive wooden horse, ostensibly as an offering to the gods. The happy Trojans dragged the gift inside the city walls. But the horse was full of Greek warriors, who emerged in the night to kill, burn, and rape.

Guber tells us that stories can also function as Trojan Horses. The audience accepts the story because, for a human, a good story always seems like a gift. But the story is actually just a delivery system for the teller's agenda. A story is a trick for sneaking a message into the fortified citadel of the human mind.

Guber's book is relentlessly optimistic about the power of story to persuade. But as the bloody metaphor of the Trojan Horse suggests, story is a tool that can be used for good or ill. Like fire, it can be used to warm a city or to burn it down. Guber understands this, but he emphasizes story's ability to bring on change for the better. His book is about people who tell good stories to overcome resistance, usually for laudable reasons. But, approached from a slightly different angle, *Tell to Win* is a book about highly capable, experienced professionals suckering for story over and over (and over) again.

So there are two big lessons to take from Guber's book and from the new science of storytelling. First, storytelling is a uniquely powerful form of persuasive jujitsu. Second, in a world full of black belt storytellers, we had all better start training our defenses. Master storytellers want us drunk on emotion so we will lose track of rational considerations, relax our skepticism, and yield to their agenda. Yes, we need to tell to win, but it's just as important to learn to see the tell coming--and to steel ourselves against it.

The new gospel of business storytelling offers a challenge to common views of human nature. When we call ourselves Homo sapiens, we are arguing that it is human sapience--wisdom, intelligence--that really sets our species apart. And

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when we think we can best persuade with dispassionate presentation of costs and benefits, we are implicitly endorsing this view. But we are beasts of emotion more than logic. We are creatures of story, and the process of changing one mind or the whole world must begin with "Once upon a time."

Jonathan Gottschall teaches English at Washington and Jefferson College and is the author *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human*, published by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. His work has been featured in the New York Times Magazine, Scientific American, and the Chronicle of Higher Education, among others.

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SEAN BUVALA

Today 01:50 AM

Yikes! A "master storyteller" does not want an audience

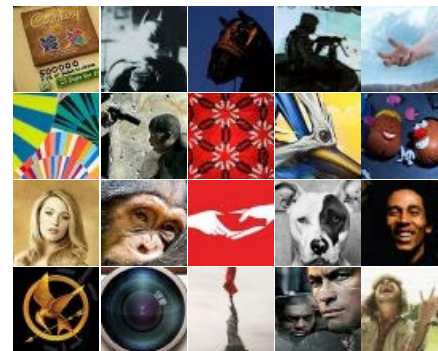
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FROM THE EDITOR

Hello and thanks for visiting Co.Create. Here, we explore creativity in the converging worlds of branding, entertainment, and tech. This site, and its associated tentacles, will serve up daily inspiration from creative people and the films, shows, ad campaigns, apps, games, music, and other things they make. But we'll also go behind the work and get into the the guts of creativity-- exploring creative process and the bigger issues around how people, companies, and industries are making creative ideas happen.  
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"drunk on emotion."

To put this in context: I've been thinking about this article from the perspective of a storytelling professional. That's biz coaching, international story performance and authoring books for some 26 years. I've been working with online discussions of storytelling since before Google even existed.

It's a good article on the science of storytelling overall. I'm not sure what this article adds to the "business storytelling" discussion specifically, except more theory. And, as I experience it, there is more than enough business storytelling theory floating around. Let's be much more practical and put out some serious how-to versus more emotional-focused poetry.

If I am reading this correctly, the article is filed under this site's category of "Industry POV." I don't see an exclusive business POV here. Substitute "education," "health care" or "babysitting" whenever the word "business" is mentioned and the article still works. Maybe use the words "teachers," "doctors" or "low-paid teenagers" for the word "professionals," too. This could easily have been about "storytelling in education" in the NEA magazine instead of business in the Fast Company magazine. Maybe it was just poor placement by Fast Company that leaves me so underwhelmed.

I do struggle with the author's well-intentioned closing. Discounting the use of logic/facts in trade for (insert soft music here) narrative really damages the truth of what story can do. Again: a "master storyteller" does not want an audience "drunk on emotion." The purpose of story (real-life, world tale or fairy tale) is to carry logic and reason, not to replace it. I mentioned this earlier in a response to another poster: my goal as a storyteller (in any situation) is rarely just an emotional response. Oh, sure, I can achieve that when it's desired. However, what I want is to go beyond the emotional with a longer-lasting (but slower in forming) lesson, meaning or message. Emotional response is more a feature of good theater or acting techniques. However,



storytelling is not acting, including when used in business settings.

Insisting (as I think I see in the article) that we \*must\* begin with "once upon a time" for every audience all the time discounts the very nature and work of a storyteller in the boardroom or on stage. As a storyteller, my experience teaches me to know both when to lead with a story and when not to. Being mindful of story placement is a real skill.

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ROSEANN CONNOLLY

Today 04:15 AM

I agree - I develop the meaningful involvement of service users and carers in educating health and social care professionals. I particularly agree with your point: 'However, what I want is to go beyond the emotional with a longer-lasting (but slower in forming) lesson, meaning or message.'

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JEFF POWERS

Yesterday 12:44 PM

Great article, I'm anxious to read the book and find out more about Pete Gruber's take on stories as communication vehicles. There's a great book out right now by Jim Signorelli called "StoryBranding", which discusses how brands can become story vehicles. Might make a good companion piece to "Tell to Win"

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CHRISTINA CARSON

Yesterday 11:00 AM

I used to write non-fiction, using that genre to tell what is mine to share in this world. Then one day it hit me - fiction is ten times more powerful a venue. The nature of storytelling reduces resistance to the message to almost zero and allows the reader to learn through the experience of the protagonist, something far more realistic to them than being "told by an expert."

Once years ago, I had the frightful task of teaching the government money management (can you imagine) to northern Natives in Canada, a savvy people who had managed on their own for thousands of years. What saved us all was when, out of desperation, the storyteller in me said, "Let me

tell you a story." Every sleeping head in the room rose as if on cue, and we all survived the day with a good heart.

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## HADRIANUS MEISTER

Yesterday 06:34 AM

The same point is made in a book I recently read - "Pitch Anything: An Innovative Method for Presenting, Persuading, and Winning the Deal" by Oren Klaff. According to Klaff, the neocortex is responsible for what he calls "cold cognition" (numbers, data, logic) while the croc brain is responsible for "hot cognition" (emotional decision). When a message is submitted to a person, it's the croc brain that acts first, and if he decides it's OK (read non-threatening, attractive, novelty, stimulating), then it's passed on to the neocortex for conscious rationalization.

I reckon marketers know this all too well, since they constantly use hordes of trojan horses to make us eat junk, drink cola and then feel guilty and read self help literature while gulping "anti-fat" pills.

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## SIMON BIRT

Yesterday 02:46 AM

Unfortunately large sales are made to bodies of people like committees, and disparate stakeholders, over long sales cycles. Telling stories is powerful one on one or one to few. So, it works better for small sales as the decision is made at the time the story is told i.e. when emotional response is highest. Try to drive the emotional response gained by storytelling through a proposal for a million dollar IT project. You can't do it. Selling through stroytelling works best with low value things to people who make the decision there and then.

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## SEAN BUVALA

Today 12:57 AM

I respectfully propose that the more complicated the sale and the more esoteric the work ( The IT and Accounting Departments) the more story is needed to carry the data through a long sales process. Stories stick way past the "then and there." My experience relates that the longer a story can sit in the memory, the better it serves its purpose. Emotional response is only one target of the storyteller, and, with genuine work with the story, actually a very small part. My goal, as a professional storyteller with both performance and business, is actually to transcend the emotional response and provoke a substantive, long-term integration of story and message. Don't buy the million-dollar IT equipment because you think the story is touching as that will fade

like mist. Buy it because the lesson of the story has proven to be true and that will remain like rock.

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## HADRIANUS MEISTER

Yesterday 06:39 AM

Simon, allow me to disagree. Even a million dollar decision committee has a CxO on top and story telling can win him as your sponsor, which I think can give you an edge in the process.

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## RACHEL KABERON

Yesterday 06:12 AM

Long Before Gottschall wrote his book and this very articulate explanation, I had tripped across other signs that story was the way to go to persuade any audience of any size.

Don't confuse a long sales cycle with the decision process.

Companies or organizations who require a thorough RFP and vetting process rarely manage this without people at every stage and step.

notice the order in WHAM, winning hearts and minds. Emotions make story sticky and like a burr they transport your message and distinguish whether your story gets retold and with what frequency. Its not impossible to win over a large committee, but its hard to be a good story teller and help them hold that emotional high. Help them retell the story and the sales process becomes more pleasing, empowering everyone to believe they were the means to a successful solution. Of course it does help if your million dollar IT project delivers on its promise, because ultimately that will be the story that gets told next time.

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## KEVIN BRADY

05/02/2012 03:09 PM

well, its more like reason (sort of) filtered through emotion.

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## BRENTFREEMAN

05/02/2012 11:25 AM

Great article! I think I might buy the book. Makes me think of an interview technique that I have always tried to use - I try to tell a story with every answer. It is a difficult task (at least for me), but I believe it is a great skill to have in any situation.

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## DAVID HUGGINS

05/02/2012 11:13 AM



This is insightful and eminently useful in understanding and engaging the power of story-telling as we address sensitive social issues. Perhaps we should build a national registry of great stories that will help us to capitalize on all that's good about our society and use it to foster deliberate change.

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SEAN BUVALA

Today 01:01 AM

Gently, I think: Better than that...create your own stories. Move past the stories of everyone else and pay attention to your own moments. The first work of the storyteller is to listen and observe, notice and attend. Do the work of storytelling. It's not magic and it's not pixie dust. No database of stories replaces the genuine stories of the storyteller or story-using organization.

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CAROLYN STEARNS

05/02/2012 11:35 PM

Done just check out the National Storytelling Network!

<http://www.storynet.org/resour...>

there are many more resources and storytellers to share them!

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DSIMSAR

05/02/2012 10:59 AM

Reminds me of something a sales manager of mine always taught. "Facts tell, stories sell."

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## REACTIONS



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