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Once Upon a Sale

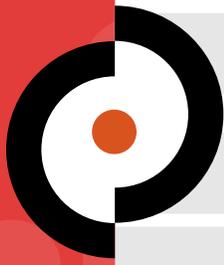
There are a lot of things that set mankind apart from the other beasts who share our planet. There are our opposable thumbs or our disproportionately large brains. Many researchers believe it is one of the ways we put those big brains to use, that has enabled us to rise to the top of the planetary pyramid – our ability to tell a good story. We use stories to make sense of our world and to communicate with one another. From the earliest times to the present day, skilled storytellers were honored by their tribes and richly rewarded. This is as true today as it ever was, just ask J. K. Rowling or Steven Spielberg.

The ability to tell a good story is especially valuable to salespeople. The human brain is hard wired for story. Brain scans have found that stories activate the most basic section of the human brain. Stories allow us to organize and make sense of all the information that constantly bombards our brain. These studies have also found that our brains do not distinguish between lived and imagined experiences. A good story teller can take our minds to places our bodies will never go. (I personally have spent a lot of time on the bridge of the Starship Enterprise) A good salesperson uses story to help his/her customers understand how advertising will help them. Here are some thoughts on how you can incorporate story telling into your sales presentations.

The Story Arc

At the most basic level, a story expresses why and how life changes. Change is frightening to us because it forces us to enter unknown territory. This is why we need to be convinced before we embark on a new course of action. This may be why there are so many love stories in the world, we need to be reassured that others have given their hearts to another before we risk our own. Love stories give us a vision of a positive outcome that outweighs our fear of commitment. Likewise a good sales story helps a prospect understand that the benefits of advertising far outweigh the risks involved. All good story tellers from Homer to Tom Clancy have structured their narrative using the same pattern. This pattern, known as a story's arc, consists of three distinct parts. The first is the "exposition" which sets up the story and introduces the characters. Example, "I worked with a local plumber whose situation was very similar to yours." The second step in the process is the "crisis" which introduces the problem, "He had a lot of jobs, but he was stressed out because his guys were spending too much time on the road between service

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calls, so his profit margin was small.” The third step in the process is the “Resolution”, the “they lived happily ever after” ending. “He decided to run a series of ads positioning his company as the Kitchen/Bathroom Makeover Experts. Within a few months his calendar was booked with major remodeling jobs. Today, his profits are up and his blood pressure is down.” By following this pattern you help the customer empathize with the character in the story and share the relief he felt when he found a solution. One of the advantages of using stories is that they are the quickest way to engage the prospect’s emotions. Prospects will forget statistics and research, but they remember stories that touch them emotionally. The story arc takes them on an emotional journey that offers a reward. They want to experience this reward again so they are inclined to buy from you.

Storytelling Skills

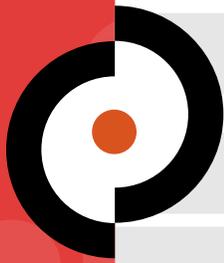
Context – You want your prospect to identify with the protagonist in your story. Use stories that are local and describe the similarities between the character’s situation and your prospect. Your goal is to make your prospect identify with the people in your story. Whenever possible use your probing skills to learn as much as possible about the prospect, his/her situation and especially the challenges they face before choosing a story to use. The more your story mirrors the customer’s situation, their “story”, the more effective it will be.

Don’t be a hero – Don’t make yourself the hero of your own sales stories. The word “I” should only appear at the beginning of the first sentence of your story, “I heard a story about.” You want to make the story about someone the prospect can identify with. Making yourself the hero of the story smacks of bragging or self promotion. If you are telling a story about how you helped a customer tell it in this way, “One of the people I work with found a great way to...” People are suspicious of self promoting stories which will make your efforts ineffective.

Keep it simple – Don’t over embellish your sales stories. A few details are useful when setting up the story to help your customer identify with your character, but the remainder of the story should be kept simple. You want the prospect to stay focused on the nature of the problem and its resolution.

Make them feel the pain – The power of stories comes from their power to touch a customer emotionally. Researchers have found that the emotions are the dominant factor in decision making. We make decisions emotionally and then come up with logical reasons to justify them. When telling a sales story,

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describe how the situation made your character feel. In the example above, the plumber was “stressed out” by the lack of larger jobs. This helps your prospect to put themselves in the character’s place and heightens their desire for the emotional relief described in your story. Use emotional language to amplify the seriousness of the challenge faced by the character in your story.

The Art of Storytelling

Storytelling is a skill and like all skills it can be learned and it is a skill that can be honed and polished through practice.

Collecting Stories

The best stories are always true stories. You should constantly be on the lookout for good stories to add to your “tool-kit.” When you receive positive feedback from an advertiser, think about how you can use what they told you to convince others to buy from you. Whenever possible ask them to give you their story in feedback. You can use this testimonial to prove the value of your products to new clients. You can also “borrow” stories from your co-workers. Pay attention to the war stories you hear around the coffee machine or photocopier. Ask the person telling the story for more details and to clarify any points you don’t understand. Don’t hesitate to use these stories with your clients saying, “One of my paper’s advertisers told us that...” Tuck these stories away in your memory or even better write them down. They will be a resource to draw upon when you need to persuade a customer to buy.

Telling Stories

Every human being is a natural born story teller. We spend our days telling stories, we relate long tales of bumper to bumper traffic or of the great bargain we found at the store. We tell tales of our childhood and of our children. As salespeople we need to take this natural inclination and use it to accomplish our sales objectives. We need to organize our collection of stories by their “Moral.” The moral of a story is the lesson that it teaches. The moral of the story above is that “advertising can be used to attract more profitable jobs.” Salespeople should be able to choose the appropriate story and integrate it seamlessly into their sales presentation. We should practice telling these stories. Even though we may tell the same story a thousand times, each time we should tell it with great energy and emotion. When telling a story, look the client in the eyes and modulate your voice and use hand gestures to accent key points. Your goal is to engage the customer’s emotions and to imprint the story in the prospect’s mind.

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Sell Me a Story

Sales people are professional communicators. Our job is to persuade others that our products offer so much value and so many benefits, that they want to purchase them. Stories are the most powerful means of communicating with one another. Research has shown that when we tell a good story, we literally get inside the head of another human being. That when we tell a vivid and believable story, the person we are talking to, shares our experience and sees the images we saw. Sales people who learn to tell a good story are certain to live happily ever after.

This article was written by Jim Busch of the Pittsburgh Pennysaver.

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