



## THROUGH STORYTELLING

By Lori L. Silverman

Mary recently opened her own business to help organizations develop new products. While she is often asked to submit proposals, few prospects turn into customers. Cost is not a factor. How can she sell more services?

When Diane purchased her business, she realized several employees came to work for the firm upon its inception and that her vision differed from that of the original owner. Diane knows it is important to talk with everyone about her views. What can she say so they fully embrace her leadership?

Nancy is president of a company in need of significant change. Without it her firm will experience long-term financial difficulties. Even though many employees outwardly agree with this change, they appear quite skeptical. How can she help them be less hesitant?

### THE ANSWER

Sound familiar? Employees. Customers. Vendors. Business partners. Capturing their attention. Knowing with certainty they grasp what you are saying. Getting them to listen and act on critical issues. They are challenges you face each and every day. What can you do to address them?

Start adding stories to your daily communications. Why? Facts and figures only inform. Stories are different. They inspire because they touch the physical, the mental, the emotional and the human spirit. People not only remember its key point, they can often accurately recall the story days, weeks, and months later. Given the way the brain works, people may, at best, recall the first and last bullet points on a PowerPoint slide. Plus, providing pros and cons encourages

debate. In contrast, telling a story stimulates people to tell one of their own, thus reinforcing the message.

### SPECIFIC EXAMPLES

How can Mary, Diane, and Nancy use storytelling? In proposals, Mary can include success stories about her firm's accomplishments and the results they achieved. After each story, Mary can include questions such as, "Don't you wish your organization had this level of success?" or "Wouldn't it be great if your organization could reduce its time to market?" to shift the focus of proposal reviewers to their immediate needs. In meetings, Mary can also use personal experience stories to answer questions and reinforce critical points.

To honor history, Diane needs to craft a story about her vision that links to the firm's past and present. She needs to paint a picture of what might happen if a new vision is not pursued, what organizational life will be like when this vision is realized, and specific steps that need to happen short term. This story will benefit from including metaphors (e.g., think of our firm as though it were a chameleon) or analogies to well-known situations (the rise and fall of the dot.com industry). After telling the story, Diane needs to encourage employees to embellish upon it. Each time Diane retells it these new details are added so that a vision is created that is truly owned by all.

Nancy can use a more personal story, speaking to a time when she was faced with a change that she hesitated to make that turned out to be extremely beneficial. After sharing her story, Nancy needs to encourage employees to share a similar story from their past and listen closely. Together, they can talk about what it took to overcome their initial skepticism and apply these insights to the current organizational change.

### ANOTHER STORY SOURCE

Sometimes one's own stories are not sufficient. In these instances, consider adding stories from friends, colleagues, newspapers, magazines, and the like. Here's one that Mary, Diane, and Nancy can use.

### TEACHING A DOG TO WHISTLE

Contributed by Sharon L. Bowman, director, The Lake Tahoe Trainers Group

An older boy named Joey, his dog, Buster, and his younger buddy, Brian, are standing on the lawn in front of Joey's house. Joey turns to Brian and says boastfully, "I taught Buster how to whistle." Brian looks at the dog for what seems like an eternity, then looks at his friend, and says, "Show me." So they both look at the dog. The dog just stands there wagging his tail with his tongue hanging out. "Okay, Buster, go to it, boy. Whistle!" Once again, the dog does

nothing. This goes on for several minutes. Each time Buster, the dog, is commanded to whistle, he looks at the boys, wags his tail, and sits there

Finally, Brian turns to Joey in disgust and says “Hey! You said your dog could whistle. Well, we’ve been here ten minutes and he hasn’t whistled once!” Joey looks at his younger buddy, Brian, with a grin on his face and says, “Of course he can’t whistle. I told you I taught him how to whistle. I didn’t say he *learned* it.”

To be effective, a tailored “ending” needs to be added that shifts the focus from the story to those who are listening. With a prospective customer, Mary could add: “How often has your company had external consultants work and leave without employees having learned a thing? Our approach is different. We ‘link to learning.’ Our consulting ensures people learn so employees can replicate our process years later.”

Diane could demonstrate her leadership style with, “How often in your work life has someone said, ‘Here’s the company vision,’ and nothing more? My style is different. To accomplish our vision we need to ‘link to learning.’ All of us need to learn together, including me. We are only as strong as the weakest link.”

With her employees, Nancy might say, “When you’ve asked how to address a problem, how often has someone else handled it instead of helping you learn? This change will be different. We will ‘link to learning.’ By learning together as a team we ensure everyone understands the change and how to achieve it.”

## WHAT CAN YOU DO?

Search for ways to add stories to your communications. Tell them with passion. Make them a part of your daily work. By doing so, you will capture people’s attention and powerfully make a point that will be remembered. Then stand back and watch the results!

“Teaching a Dog to Whistle” reproduced from *Stories Trainers Tell* by Mary B. Wacker and Lori L. Silverman with permission of the publisher. Copyright © 2003 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc. Published by Pfeiffer, a Wiley Imprint, pg. 340.

Article appeared in the Fall 2003 online version of *Female Entrepreneur*.

---

Lori L. Silverman is the owner of Partners for Progress, a management consulting firm dedicated to helping organizations think and act differently so they can achieve higher levels of performance. She is the co-author of *Critical SHIFT: The Future of Quality in Organizational Performance* and *Stories Trainers Tell*. Her new book is *Wake Me Up When the Data is Over: How Organizations Use Stories to Drive Results*.

Lori can be reached by e-mail at [lori@partnersforprogress.com](mailto:lori@partnersforprogress.com). For additional free articles, check out [www.partnersforprogress.com](http://www.partnersforprogress.com).

---