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Winning Customers Through Story: A New Take

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By Lori L. Silverman and Karen Dietz

If your organization is like most, it has invested significant dollars in training sales staff to bring in new business and maintain long-term client relationships. Chances are high that these skills have served them well. But what about in today's downturn economy? Is your enterprise receiving the level of sales it needs to survive and thrive? Or has it taken a turn for the worse?

Several actions typically are invoked in this sort of situation. Sales executives may tweak the compensation plan, hoping it will motivate their staff, or ask them to increase their work hours, require them to make more cold calls, or push them to do what they have always done—only at a heightened pace. On the other hand, what outcomes might you get if you explored the question, "Is there anything new or different we could add to our sales arsenal as a competitive advantage?"

What's New?

Most sales training programs and initiatives promote the telling of "success stories" by account executives and sales associates. But, they do not recognize that examples and case studies are not the same as compelling stories. Not surprisingly, they neglect to teach the critical elements that make a story a story and the specific structure it needs to motivate prospects to take action and close a deal.

Moreover, these endeavors overlook the fact that the most powerful story techniques for business development come in the form of story prompts, story triggers, and story listening—the ability to pull stories out of prospects and to authenticate them. If your organization desires to decrease the time it takes to turn prospects into clients and to build stronger relationships with them, then incorporating these unrecognized approaches into the sales process is critical.

Because the field of story use in organizations is less than a decade old, most early applications focused on its use in training, knowledge management, and presentation skills. Consequently, these broader story techniques only now are finding their way into core business activities.

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Some of the most comprehensive research that exists on the ROI associated with story-telling across 12 different business functions is presented in my book, "Wake

Me Up When the Data Is Over: How Organizations Use Stories to Drive Results" (2006, Jossey-Bass) —and probably is not one being read by your sales executives. Did you know 36 percent of the 72 examples in this book show documented increases to the bottom line through growth, profitability, and/or increased funding? Would this outcome make a difference in your organization?

Why Story?

Stories are not the same as examples, anecdotes, case studies, news reports, or profiles. They have unique characteristics: characters, character dialog (both internal and external), a plot (identifiable conflict), a universally applicable key point, drama, contrast, and sensory information.

What is it about stories that give them the ability to impact business results? The brain needs sensory information, patterns, and the like for experiences to be logged into immediate and short-term memory. Since a story is a packet of sensory material that allows people to quickly and easily internalize, comprehend, and create meaning, when crafted well, it can move others to open their wallets. The latest brain research not only demonstrates that stories are remembered far longer than other communication forms (bulleted information, data and facts, for example), it shows they immediately connect to the emotional center of the brain, where most buying decisions are made.

While the use of stories in organizational settings is in its infancy, the research around what makes a story powerful has been available for the last 20 years. The results include:

- Captivating people's interest and making them more attentive listeners.
- Communicating information faster, with more accurate recall of key points over time.
- Quickly and successfully conveying the meaning of complex concepts.
- Fostering creativity and enhancing problem-solving.
- Making information more believable.
- Strengthening relationships.
- Inspiring people to change.

Knowing this, why would you not be using a variety of story techniques to generate sales?

Winning New Customers

If you believe the value a story brings is key to securing new business, here are a variety of ways story techniques can be used to win new customers. As you go through this list, ask yourself, "How many of them are my organization's business development, sales, and marketing staff using today?"

Prior to Prospecting

- Understanding the business story behind new market segments.
- Gathering consumer feedback using story prompts in focus groups.
- Translating and relaying market research data and findings through composite stories.

Prospecting

- Evoking stories from new contacts at networking events.
- Listening to stories in ways that more quickly build rapport.
- Relaying a story to clearly communicate the distinction between your organization/industry and a competitive organization/industry (e.g., distinguishing between community banking, traditional banking, and credit unions).
- Having the organization's founding core values and folklore already crafted as hip-pocket stories, ready for sharing.

Calling on a Prospect

- Relaying personal stories about experiences with the prospect's business.
- Knowing how to prompt stories to help build a foundation of trust.
- Employing story triggers to get the prospect to open up about their business during discovery.
- Using story-telling as a tool to identify immediate needs and pain.

Asking for the sale

- Incorporating a story into the proposal.
- Overcoming objections by telling or prompting a story.
- Co-creating a future story.
- Substituting traditional PowerPoint slides for a story-based presentation.

Post-Sale

- Soliciting testimonials as stories.
- Conveying results through stories.

Can You Afford to Wait?

Stories are the most powerful communication vehicles we have for connecting,

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communicating, and influencing others. Unconsciously we think in stories, talk in stories, and inspire through stories. What about using them to increase sales? Start training your business development and sales force to consciously and competently use a variety of story techniques and watch what happens to the bottom line.

Lori Silverman is a strategist, speaker, and author, and the owner of Partners for Progress, a management consulting firm. Her books include "Stories Trainers Tell and Wake Me Up When the Data Is Over: How Organizations Use Stories to Drive Results." She can be reached at lori@partnersforprogress.com.

For more than a decade, Karen Dietz has specialized in working with organizational narratives, along with turning leaders into compelling storytellers. Her company, Polaris Associates, provides story work consulting, tools, and coaching. She can be reached at www.polaris-associates.com.

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