

A better answer to the question, “So, what do you do?”

Paul Smith

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My guest this week is Lori Silverman. She’s a management consultant, speaker, trainer, and the author of a number of fabulous books, including:

- [Wake me up when the data is over: How organizations use stories to drive results,](#)
- [Stories Trainers Tell: 55 Ready to use stories to make training stick,](#) and
- [Business Storytelling for Dummies](#)

I’ve read them all and highly recommend them. She’s one of my early influencers in the business storytelling space, so I was honored to have her on my podcast this week.



I asked her to join me to talk about this question that we all get at conferences, or holiday parties, or just any time you meet someone new. And we’ve gotten it so many times, you’d think we’d be good at answering it. But my guess is, most of us are unhappy with what comes out of our mouths when we respond. And that question is

| *So, what do you do?”*

I asked her why we struggle so much when asked that question, and how can we do a better job of answering it? She answered with an insightful example, telling me how a guy named John Pollack answers the question. And he doesn’t just have one answer to the question. He has three, depending on who’s asking the question. Lori explains below.

How Memorable Are You?

Told by John Pollack, crafted by Lori Silverman

Anyone whose lived in the Phoenix, Arizona area for more than a calendar year knows that October truly is THE BEST time of the year. Daytime temperature drops into the 80s, the nights are cool, the monsoon rains have stopped, and the haboobs — dust storms that can be a mile high and five miles wide — go away.

In October of 2012, you could’ve fooled my coaching client whose name is John, that it was the best month of the year. At age 24, he co-owned a business called Young Guns, a small fabrication shop that specialized in restoring and customizing cars, trucks, and motorcycles. They company’s also done some metal work in downtown Tempe restaurants.

Because John’s claim to fame is his upholstery work, he was spending all his waking hours —and then some — on

putting in a full leather interior into a deep blue 1950 deep blue Chevy truck. He was pouring a 100 percent of his heart and soul into this job, just like he'd done with ever other job. That's because the company's mantra is "striving for perfection." He'd been working like this for a few years without getting paid a cent.

Every day that October, he encountered some type of monsoon or nasty dust storm with the customer. The owner of the vehicle wanted one thing yet the guy who was in charge of rebuilding the truck wanted another. Every day it was: "Change this."

"You got it wrong. Change it back."

"This looks like crap. That looks like ... "

Well ... you get the picture.

The problem was, this wasn't the first really picky customer he'd encountered.

Half way through that job he wrote me an email. It said, "I'm finished with all this crap. I'm leaving the company as soon as I'm done with this job. This customer has pushed me over the edge. I can't handle this any more."

And he did just that. He told his business partner that he was leaving ... and he walked out, with nothing.

After he left, he became a hermit in his apartment, reading book after book after book. About once every week or so, he'd meet with me at Paradise Bakery to go over what he'd read.

I still remember the day when I saw the spark in his eyes again. He said, "Hey Lor, I just read the 4 Hour Work Week and realized I don't have to work a million hours and kill myself and have this gigantic company to do well in life. It opened my eyes up to the possibility of making things more simple and to searching for businesses where the value is higher per hour. Where you can make money while you're not necessarily working on the business."

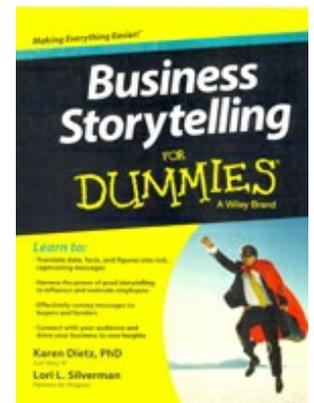
I quizzed him. "Tell me more about what you're thinking."

He replied, "I'm gonna move back to northern California and set up a business where I teach people how to do upholstery through online videos. No hard copies. Kinda like I did at Young Guns when I put a few short videos out on YouTube. We had thousands of followers. The information's really not out there. There's a few books and there's some other guys kinda doing what I wanna do but not anywhere near the depth that I'll do it. It's a dying art. Since Wyotech shut down — that's the school I went to — minus getting a job, there's really no schools that teach this stuff. I want to be THE person out there trying to bring back this knowledge and make it available to more people."

He hesitated for a bit, and then said, "I have this dream. Imagine a person that just got laid off or who has a job they hate. But in their spare time, they like working on their car or their boat or their motorcycle. This person can take my videos, learn the basics of automotive, marine, and industrial upholstery, and if it's something they really enjoy, they can make a life for themselves with it too. If they have a thousand dollars, they can buy all the tools on Craig's List. I'll give them an e-book on what to purchase with the beginner video series. What I'll provide are all the basic skills that they need, including everything I learned after I got out of school. I believe in a world of abundance. There's more work out there in the industry than I could ever do."

He did just as he said. The end of December, he packed up his car and went back home to Northern California and set up a company called Lucky Needle. He found a guy who wanted a full custom re-upholstery job on his 1954 Chevy Bel Air and got his uncle to let him use his garage to do all the taping. Every day for twelve hours, he'd shoot video and then he'd go home and edit it for another six hours. He did this every single day for two solid months.

And then, something happened.



His friend Remington showed up in town. Remington asked, “Hey dude, could you help out for a day or two with a racing team? It’s the Scuderia Corsa, the Ferrari Beverly Hills racing team.” So he did. A week later, the team asked him, “Can you come to this race and help out in the pit?” And he did. A few weeks after that, they offered him a job. His first response was, “No. I have this new online company called Lucky Needle.” They told him he didn’t need to give it up. That they’d fly him home between major races in the US and Canada. And that he could also work on it during his free time, while on the road. He thought about it for a few days and eventually accepted.

If you were to meet John and ask him what he does for work, he’s not going to give you an elevator pitch like, “I transform ideas into tangible businesses” — which he easily could do since Lucky Needle is his third entrepreneurial venture at age 28 — nor is he going to go into great detail about what the sort of work that he does.

Instead, you’re going to hear one of two stories. You’re either going to hear the story of how he got the idea to start Lucky Needle. Or, you’re going to hear the story of the dream he has for people who want to turn a hobby into how they make a living.

Or ... if he knows you’re a big fan of racing, you may hear this story ...

When Scuderia Corsa first started using me as their fabricator, I had told them, “I can weld. I can repair upholstery.” But all they had me do was be a go-fer: “Go clean this. Go organize that.”

One day, we got into this big crash in Canada. They asked me to fix the car but all I could think was, “I have my own idea what to do but I’ve never fixed a racecar before, let alone a Ferrari.”

The team brought this one guy in to show me how to fix the car when it gets in a bad crash. He talked to me for 20 minutes about stuff I’d done. Over the next two days, I worked with him on fixing the car. He could tell by talking to me that I knew how to weld and fix frame damage.

What he kept saying over and over again is, “Look at this car. It’s not a red Ferrari. It’s not even a racecar. Stop overcomplicating things. Just cut this off and put it back the way it’s supposed to be. I know you know how that works. Measure this. Measure that. Stop making things complicated. Ask yourself, ‘Does it work and does it work well?’ If it does, then go onto the next thing.”

Ever since then, we’ve had multiple worse crashes. I’ve never run into a problem that I haven’t been able to fix just because he got me to stop seeing the car as an expensive two million dollar racecar that only engineers and rocket scientists should work on. I just fix the car. I make it work and I make it work well.

What about you? When someone asks, “What do you do?,” how do you respond? Do you give an elevator pitch or your job title or start listing out some of the tasks that you do — or do you tell a story?

John tells a story. He does that because he knows it makes him memorable. And that it sparks a conversation. He tells a story because he knows it’s the only form of communication that touches people physically, mentally, emotionally, and at the level of the human spirit where people are moved to take action.

The next time someone asks you what you do, are you going to respond as you always do? Or are you going to tell a story? You need to say it with a story.

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