The Power of Story

Steve Brown, Possibility & Purpose, LLC

Futurist Steve Brown weaves the tale of how he became a believer in the power of business storytelling.

FROM THE EDITOR

This month’s column focuses on the story aspect of science fiction prototyping. It’s been said that science fiction gives us a language to talk about the future; if this is true, then the power of story goes even deeper. Humans are story machines. Author Steve Brown is a futurist who makes stories an integral part of his process.

—Brian David Johnson

Stories have the power to enthral audiences, cement powerful memories in their minds, and inspire them to follow the storyteller. Storytelling is also a business skill that every leader should seek to master. Yet, when I first heard about storytelling, I thought, “That sounds like some kind of childish, new age rubbish.”

As I stood in a windowless conference room on a wet, dreary Oregon day, my manager instructed me to not only find out what “business storytelling” was but to also teach the company’s executives how to do it—and do it well. To say I was unconvincing would be putting it mildly. Being a good corporate soldier, I agreed to try.

Six months passed. I immersed myself in stacks of books; watched a zillion TED Talks videos; and researched the science, art, and craft of storytelling. By the time I was finished, I was a convert. I was astonished to realize that storytelling was not only something I’d done naturally for years as a professional communicator but also, when done well, something that increases your influence and...
persuasive abilities. This is the story of what I learned from this process and why I now see storytelling as the number one skill of great, charismatic leaders.

When used strategically, stories let you literally control your audience’s minds. I’ll say that again, because it’s kind of a big deal: stories let you channel Mr. Spock and do a mind-meld with your audience. And it’s all because of how evolution wired our brains.

Princeton University neuroscientist Uri Hasson revealed that a process dubbed neural coupling occurs when one person tells a story to another person. In his study, Hasson placed two volunteers in separate MRI machines to monitor their brain patterns. One person, the speaker, was fitted with a microphone. The listener wore headphones linked to the speaker. When the speaker read facts and other random information nuggets to the listener, the individuals’ brain patterns were divergent. But remarkably, once the speaker started telling a story, both brain patterns converged—this is neural coupling. When the speaker returned to just listing facts, the link was severed and the brain patterns diverged once again.

The period between when humans learned to talk and when we learned to write was long enough for our brains to evolve the ability to pass important information from generation to generation through stories. As a result, we’re all innately fabulous storytellers, and, more importantly, we’re tremendous “story listeners.” Our brains evolved to listen intently to and remember stories. If you want someone to remember something important, tell them a story about it. Stories can also help convince others of an argument. If you want someone to do something, tell them a story.

How many of your daily decisions would you consider rational? Most? Half? Wrong. According to Baba Shiv, a professor of marketing at Stanford Graduate School of Business, 95 percent of our daily decisions are emotional, not rational. It doesn’t appear that way because the rational brain often presents the emotional decision (that we’ve already made) to our conscious mind as a rational decision. You’ll see this process in action when buying your next car. You’ll tell yourself a story about how cool you’ll look driving the car down a winding mountain road, and subconsciously, you’ll decide to buy the car. Then, you’ll look at the car’s fuel economy and resale value and use those facts to justify the purchase to yourself.

Stories talk to the emotional center of your audience’s brain. And data talk to the rational part of their brain. The best way to bring people around to your way of thinking is to wrap your data in stories. The story helps listeners make the emotional decision (usually subconsciously), while the data helps them justify that decision (that’s already made) to their rational brain. Jared’s transformational story inspired the sale of billions of Subway sandwiches. But the “six grams of fat or less” sealed the deal.

Stories can be incredibly persuasive. Author Simon Sinek famously said, “Leaders only need one thing: followers.” The best way to gather followers is to inspire them by describing a compelling, imagined future. Change management guru John Kotter advises that to inspire others to follow them through potentially painful changes, leaders must “paint a vivid picture” of the future. As a futurist, that’s what I do for a living.

The best stories evoke a powerful emotional response in audiences. These stories are memorable, easily repeatable, and vivid. They have relatable characters and summon all five senses. At their core, good stories focus on the lead character’s transformation over time. That character could be you, your audience, or a third party. Every great story—from The Great Gatsby to Goodfellas—is one of powerful transformation.

Stories make your ideas memorable. They can even make them go viral. They have the power to inspire and persuade other people, even those on the other side of the world. So the next time you need someone to make a decision, remember something important, or follow you somewhere new, try telling them a story. ✪