Stories THAT Stick

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How Storytelling Can
Captivate Customers, Influence Audiences,
and Transform Your Business

KINDRA HALL

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dedication to come.

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Introduction

Slovenia, JFK, and the Story That Kidnapped My Husband

It was Thanksgiving weekend. Six thousand miles away, people were eating turkey and mashed potatoes, sharing what they were grateful for, and passing out on couches with the dull roar of football playing in the background.

I was doing none of those things . . . because I was in Slovenia.

I'll be honest. "I'm in Slovenia" is not something I ever imagined I would say—except for that one time I met a Slovenian soccer player while on vacation in Mexico and was convinced for a day that I would marry him. And yet there I was. There *we* were. My husband, Michael (who does not play soccer), and I were wandering around the quaint, slightly damp cobblestone streets of Ljubljana, Slovenia's capital. And though we missed Thanksgiving, I felt distinctly grateful. Not only for the fairy tale city we had just stepped into . . .

But because I'd just heard one of the best sales stories of my life.

Before I go any further, I should tell you something. Stories are my life. They are my work, my currency, the way I see the world. I told my first story when I was eleven years old. And ever since that day, stories have followed me, sought me, and now I spend my days speaking about using stories strategically and teaching others to tell theirs.

In fact, stories are the reason I was in Slovenia. I was invited from the United States specifically to speak to nearly one thousand marketing and brand managers, media execs, and advertising creatives from across eastern Europe on the power of storytelling in business.

So you can imagine the irony, or at the very least the intrigue, when I—the story expert—witnessed the greatest story coup of all time.

It happened in the evening hours of that late November weekend. Though Slovenians don't celebrate Thanksgiving, the city was festive and alive as they celebrated the beginning of the holiday season with an annual tree-lighting ceremony. Michael and I walked among thousands of Slovenians enjoying local wine, chestnuts roasting on the open fires of street vendors, and more wine. The night sky was dark, the air was wet and chilled, and the streets glowed with soft, warm light from the Christmas décor suspended between every building. The faint sound of carols echoed from the city center, and the shop windows lining the streets sparkled, calling to us, inviting us to come in and explore.

Well, that's not entirely true. The shop windows were calling to *me,* not *us.* Shop windows do not call to Michael, because Michael does not shop. He doesn't window-shop, online-shop, bargain-shop, or anything-shop. He purchases almost no things. The elastic waistband of his underwear disintegrates before Michael buys another pair. He, in fact, may not even have a wallet.

As our European trip progressed, this fundamental difference in our shopping preferences developed into a rather repetitive conversation:

Me: Oh! A local designer's boutique. Let's check it out!
Michael: [Acts as if he didn't hear me. Keeps walking.]
Me: Oh! A local rug maker's shop. Let's check it out!

Michael: [Doesn't hear me. Keeps walking.]

Me: Oh! Everything in that shop is made of cork. Let's check it out!

Michael: [Pulls out his cellphone, though it doesn't work. Keeps walking.]

Me: Oh! Fresh bread!

Michael: [Takes a deep breath of baked-bread air. Keeps walking.]

This didn't offend me for two reasons. One, I'm used to it. And two, we had only brought two carry-ons for this weeklong trip. Not even the softest piece of bread would squeeze into our luggage, so I didn't put up much of a fight.

Until that night. Until I saw the shoes.

There, sitting proudly in one of the gloriously lit windows, was a pair of show-stopping shoes.

They were silver. And sparkly. *Glittery* even. And perhaps it was all the wine (and lack of bread), but in that moment, I couldn't resist any longer. Before he knew what was happening, I dragged an unsuspecting Michael into an upscale boutique on a Ljubljanan side street.

Inside, the store was an eclectic mix of products, from watches and jewelry to art and clothing. I made a beeline for the shoes and left Michael to fend for himself near the fragrances.

To my great dismay, up close the shoes were atrocious. Blinding. I immediately felt a deep sense of guilt for abandoning Michael at the first glimpse of glitter. I ran back toward the front of the store where Michael was trying to hide behind a rotating tower of perfume bottles. Just as I was about to grab him and head outside to the safety of the cobblestones, a very ambitious twenty-something Slovenian sales clerk appeared, as if from thin air, from behind the fragrance counter, just inches from where Michael was standing and called to him.

"Excuse me, sir. Were you looking for a scent?"

Oh, no, I thought. *Oh, this poor kid is so far off . . .*

Michael was most definitely not looking for a scent. Not only because looking for a scent would imply purchasing a scent—which we've already covered—but because Michael does not wear cologne. Ever. He's not a scent kind of guy. He was only near the scent counter because he needed someplace to stand-slash-hide.

Which is exactly what I tried to tell the salesman, but he didn't seem to care. Instead, he delicately removed a navy-and-white striped box from an upper shelf of the display.

"This is our bestseller," he stated, his fingers (unusually long, I noticed) gently framed the box. We braced ourselves to be spritzed against our will.

But the salesman didn't even open the box. Instead, he put the unopened package down on the glass countertop and, with the slight smile of a man who knows what he's doing, began.

Eight & Bob

"This . . . is Eight & Bob.[1]

"In 1937, a young, handsome, American college student was touring the French Riviera. At twenty years old, there was something special about him. All who met him could sense a rising star."

The young clerk paused to see if we were listening. We were.

"One day this young man was out and about the town when he encountered a Frenchman by the name of Albert Fouquet, a Parisian aristocrat and perfume connoisseur.

"Of course, the young man doesn't know this. All he knows is the man smells *incredible*. Being quite charming, the ambitious American convinces Fouquet, who never sold his scents, to share a small sample of the irresistible cologne."

I glanced at Michael. He had yet to blink.

"As you can imagine, when the young man returned to the States, others were entranced by the scent as well, and if he wasn't irresistible

before, he certainly was now. The young man knew he was on to something, so he wrote to Fouquet, imploring that he send eight more samples 'and one for Bob.'"

Though he didn't say anything, Michael's face asked the question the clerk answered next.

"You see, Bob was the young man's brother. And the young man, well, you probably know him as John. Or simply J."

The clerk's voice trailed off before the end of the sentence, and Michael, as if he had just discovered One-Eyed Willy's pirate treasure, whispered "FK."

"Yes," the clerk nodded. "The young man in question was none other than John F. Kennedy. And the sample was for his brother, Robert."

At this point, I was no longer a participant in the interaction (if I ever was) but rather a spectator. While I wanted to know how the Eight & Bob story ended, I was more interested in the story that was happening before my eyes.

"This is JFK's cologne?" Michael said with wonder.

"Indeed, it is." The clerk continued. "Of course, as you know, international relations weren't always easy between the United States and France. And though I am no history expert, I do know that shipping bottles of cologne became increasingly more difficult. So, in order to protect the final shipments from the Nazis, the last few bottles were hidden—"

The clerk paused and looked at Michael, whose mouth may or may not have been hanging open.

"In books." On that cue, the clerk opened the box he'd pulled from the shelf so long ago. In the box was a book. He opened the book. And there, nestled inside the pages that had been perfectly cut away to frame its contents, was a beautiful crystal bottle of cologne.

At that moment Michael said three words I've never heard him say before.

"I'll take it."

How a Story Changes Everything

At this point one thing has become clear to me: my husband has been kidnapped and replaced with an impostor. A cologne-buying alien. A cologne, to be clear, Michael hasn't even smelled.

Truly, though, I know better. There is nothing alien about what happened to Michael in that Slovenian shop. In fact, his response to the clerk's efforts was the most human thing that could have happened.

Because stronger than a man's desire to keep his wallet closed . . .

More charming than JFK himself . . .

Is the irresistible power of a story. A perfectly placed, impeccably delivered story can transport a person to a place beyond interested, straight past paying attention, and into a state of complete captivation. The "can't look away" kind. The "holy crap, I just missed my exit" kind. In these moments of story we are, like my husband that evening, seized in a way that feels almost beyond our control.

There's a reason it feels that way. As we'll see, when it comes to a great story, we really can't help ourselves. From the moment the sales clerk in that boutique began to tell the Eight & Bob story, a shift happened in us: a shift in our understanding, a shift in our desires.

This is the shift so many of us seek. Far beyond buying a bottle of cologne, the shift a story can make has a profound impact on business. It turns customers into converts. It transforms employees into evangelists. Executives into leaders. It changes the nature and impact of marketing, and perhaps most importantly, it can change how we see ourselves.

How that shift happens and how you can create it by harnessing the power of storytelling are what this book is about.

As fate would have it, the only bottle of Eight & Bob in the boutique that night was the sample we saw on the shelf. We couldn't even buy it. In his excitement to tell us the story, the clerk neglected to see if he had any

in stock. But our inability to bring a bottle home in no way diminished Michael's enthusiasm. In fact, it fueled it.

My typically even-keeled husband was suddenly charged. As we left the boutique and I began a search for our next spot to drink wine, Michael spoke and gestured with the fervor of an impassioned European. He marveled over the great packaging of the product, so perfectly aligned with the story. He imagined the rare scent being snuck past the Nazis, arriving, perhaps in secret, at the White House. Mysterious books containing hidden bottles of cologne someday sitting on the desk of the president of the United States.

"We should try to get the distribution rights for North America," he said. "This stuff is amazing. Everyone should know about it."

Keep in mind: never once did we talk about what the cologne actually smelled like. It didn't matter. By the time we returned to our hotel that evening, we'd decided to go back to the store the next day in case a shipment arrived before we had to catch our flight home.

When we arrived the next morning, the sales clerk from the previous evening was gone. In his place, a middle-aged woman explained they were still out of Eight & Bob.

I was curious. "Can you tell us anything about the cologne?"

"Let's see," she mused. "There are five different scents in the product line. Uh," she struggled, "they use unique plants from, um, France. It seems very popular. The packaging is nice." Then she ran out of steam. That was it.

The difference between the two experiences was shocking. As if yesterday we'd accidentally stumbled into a boutique staffed by magicians and overnight it had been transformed into a 7-Eleven.

Shocking. But not uncommon. In my work I see this messaging tragedy on a daily basis. Sales teams struggling to communicate the fascinating story of the solution they represent. Agents who miss the mark

trying to effectively engage potential customers. Companies whose cultures wither instead of thrive because their leaders can't articulate the stories of why they do what they do.

The good news is, no amount of wizardry is required to solve this problem. In the pages that follow, we'll discover how storytelling has the power to change how everyone in business thinks, feels, and behaves and how you can use that power yourself.

And though I highly recommend Ljubljana during the holidays, no trip to Slovenia is required.

PART ONE

The Irresistible Power of Storytelling

CHAPTER ONE

The Gaps in Business and the Bridges That Close (and Don't Close) Them

The shortest distance between a human being and the truth is a story.

–Anthony de Mello

The cutest boy in my high school was Andy K. Truthfully, he'd been the cutest boy since third grade. No one was really sure why. Maybe because he was born in May, but his parents waited to put him in school until the following fall, so he was the oldest. Or maybe it was because he was an incredible athlete. Or simply because he just seemed slightly indifferent about everything.

Whatever it was, it meant the fall afternoon of my freshman year, when Andy offered to share a can of Welch's grape soda with me, my high

school fate was sealed. Andy thought I was okay, which meant everyone else had to as well.

That was 1994. Social acceptance was measured that way, by the things you shared with others. Best friend heart necklaces split down the middle, cans of soda, and the other standout: packs of Extra gum.

I remember never leaving home without a pack of neon green Extra gum (thirty individually foil-wrapped pieces held loosely together with a strip of white paper). You could slip the pieces one by one from the pack, leaving a slight trace of where each had been. It was perfect for sharing with friends and boys who were slightly out of your league (namely, Andy K.). Each empty pack was a symbol of social currency.

Apparently, I wasn't the only one who swore by Extra gum. For years, this Wrigley brand sat at the top of the chewable breath-freshening totem pole. Checking out at the grocery store? Grab a pack of Extra. Upcoming dentist appointment? Don't forget the Extra. It was the go-to brand and dominated the market until suddenly . . . it didn't.

By 2013, almost twenty years after my freshman year of high school when I'd never have considered buying anything *but* Extra gum, the iconic brand had slid to third position. Even as I, once a brand loyalist, glanced at the rows of gum options, Extra didn't even register with me.

Before you start feeling bad for Extra, and especially before you start thinking this was of their own doing—that they must have made an outrageously obvious, foolishly unfortunate, inevitable mistake—let's be clear: this is a fundamental problem in business. Not just for Extra. Not just for products that sit on a shelf. It's a problem in *all* business.

Ultimately, what Extra was struggling with, what all businesses struggle with, was bridging a gap.

The Gap in Your Business

The goal of a business is to profitably deliver value to people, to get a product or service from point A (the business) to point B (the people who

will use it). That's it. There are an infinite number of ways to achieve these goals, of course, but the overall goal itself is pretty simple.

Simple but not easy. No goal worth attaining comes without obstacles, and in business there are plenty of those. How do you get people to buy? To invest? How do you attract talent? Retain it? How do you convince one department to act in a timely manner regarding an issue that is only relevant to another department? How do you convince a higher-up to buy in on an idea? Rally direct reports around a particular initiative? How do you get suppliers to deliver on time?

No matter where you turn, behind every corner and from every angle, there are always obstacles. In fact, getting past them is what defines successful business.

I find it more helpful, however, to think of those obstacles in business not as daunting, immovable blockages but rather as gaps. It is the space between what you want and where you are. The gap.

The most obvious gap in business is the void between the customer and the company. How does a company get its product or service into the hands of the people who need it? When you're standing in line at the grocery checkout and faced with twenty different gum options, how does Extra get you to choose Extra?

But while the sales gap is important, there are other gaps everywhere in business. There are gaps between entrepreneurs and potential investors, between recruiters and prospective employees, between managers and employees, between leaders and executives.

To make a business work, you need to bridge the gaps.

More importantly, those who bridge the gaps best, win. If you can sell better, pitch better, recruit better, build better, create better, connect better—you win.

Bridge the gaps, win the game.

Of course, in order to do that, you need to *build* the bridge.

Which is where it all starts to fall apart.

Bad Materials, Weak Bridges

Regardless of the type of gap you face in business, you must master three main elements if you have any hopes of moving your intended audience—potential customers, key team members, investors, etc.—across the great divide: attention, influence, and transformation.

First and foremost, the best bridges must capture attention and captivate the audience so they know the bridge is there in the first place. The second element, influence, is the means by which you're able to compel the audience to take the action you desire. And third, if you don't want to have to keep bridging the same gaps over and over again, the best bridges transform the audience, creating a lasting impact and leaving the audience changed, so they never even consider returning to the other side of the bridge, thereby closing the gap forever.

Pretty straightforward, right?

The problem—the tragedy really—is that despite our best efforts and intentions, we are really bad at building bridges. We focus on just one of the elements, maybe two, but rarely all three. We talk *at* people instead of engaging *with* them. We default to what's easiest or flashiest, and as a result, our bridges are flimsy, fleeting, and sometimes downright ridiculous. But because these substandard solutions are so prevalent, we've convinced ourselves they are sufficient.

Think of all the real estate agents' faces you've seen on bus stops or all the pop-up ads you've instinctually x'ed out of or the hours of commercials you've scrolled past. For a while, back in 2016, when the *Star Wars* craze was in full swing again, there was a guy who stood outside a local salon in my neighborhood dressed like Darth Vader and holding a hair dryer as a way to lure people in for a haircut. What does Darth Vader have to do with a hair salon? It's hard to guess, since the guy always wears a helmet, and yet there he stood.

Or consider the salesperson in front of a group of decision makers who launches into her pitch, equipped with a clicker that doubles as a laser pointer. The salesperson feels pretty confident. After all, she spent

no fewer than six hours cramming every last feature, benefit, percentage, and decimal point onto the deck of eighty-nine slides for a twenty-minute presentation. I mean, the people in the room won't be able to actually read any of it on the screen—it's too small and cluttered—but that doesn't matter because the salesperson is planning to read it *to* them off the screen. Who could possibly say no to *that*?!

Please. This bridge is no good, and anyone who tells you it is is a liar.

Let's consider the bridges we try to build internally—the ones meant to create a healthy company culture. Perhaps you work for a company that is committed to its mission and culture, which is great. The culture is taught via a handbook. And leaders within the company often send out emails or newsletters or speak from podiums using the wording from the mission statement. Maybe it's printed on mugs. But does anyone actually feel anything about it? They know the words, but do they feel it in their bones? Does it shape their decisions and create a deep sense of commitment?

It could. But, sadly, most companies and leaders have accepted the lie that repeating the mission statement is a sufficient bridge for connecting and motivating teams. The truth is, one slight breeze—one small salary increase or perk promised by another company—and, like it says in the nursery rhyme about a certain span in London, that bridge is falling down.

That being said, I feel it's only fair to mention that, yes, it *is* possible to bridge a gap without all three essential elements—attention, influence, and transformation. And it *is* possible to use materials that are cheap and blueprints designed for instant gratification versus lasting growth. For example, I confess, I am a sucker for Instagram ads that are photos of cute workout clothes. I'll usually click on the ad and even sometimes buy it. But when people ask me about my hobbies, I have to mention taking things to the UPS Store to be returned, because I return 90 percent of my insta-ad buys.

I doubt that's what you're going for.

I doubt you're investing in marketing only to have your products

returned or forgotten. Or that you enjoy creating constant price cuts for random holidays. Or giving pitches that don't close. Or talking to employees who tune you out. Or creating social media posts no one will click on. Or implementing random contests to achieve arbitrary goals. I doubt you hire, train, and incentivize top talent just to have them look elsewhere the second you take the carrot away or offer a slightly smaller carrot.

If gaps have emerged in your business or on your path to success that you just can't seem to close, there's a good chance the problem starts with the elements you're using, or not using, to build your bridges.

The question is, what works? If none of these tactics get the job done, what does? Is there a way to simultaneously capture attention, influence, and transform audiences? How do you build bridges that last and close the gaps once and for all?

That is the very question Extra gum was desperate to answer.

The Gap-Bridging Solution

With sales in a steady slide and their once effortless title as king of the gum mountain no longer on firm footing, Extra had to do something. At first, they did what any of us would do: they went back to the basics. They went back to what worked during the Extra glory days. They doubled down on the feature Extra was known for: long-lasting flavor. You couldn't watch a sitcom in the eighties without seeing a commercial of smiling people living their best lives while chewing the same piece of flavor-filled gum for what one could only imagine was weeks at a time.

Long-lasting flavor! That was obviously the answer. So the team at Extra created more messages about how extra Extra really was. The result was abysmal. First, it gained little if any attention (a search on YouTube for any of these commercials will leave you empty-handed) and even less influence. Sales still slid.

The gap reality remained. When it came to that critical,

less-than-two-second moment in the grocery aisle when consumers might choose Extra, they didn't. Determined, Extra sought answers. They hired a research firm to determine why people buy gum in the first place and when the gum-buying decision was actually made.

The results were fascinating. It turns out 95 percent of gum decisions are made unconsciously, without the consumer even knowing it. This meant, in order to be the gap winner when the zombie buyer reached for a breath-freshening solution, Extra had to somehow burrow itself into the depths of the human experience. They had to exist in that special place where logic doesn't really matter. A place where gum buying was about more than just buying gum.

Essentially, Extra needed to get consumers across the bridge.

But how? And was it even possible with something as commoditized as chewing gum?

The answer that worked for Extra is the same answer that will work for you. No matter the scenario. No matter the gap. No matter the product or the audience. The easiest, most effective way to build bridges that capture attention, influence behavior, and transform those who cross them, resulting in gaps that stay closed and bridges that last, is with storytelling.

In the end, stories are what stick.

Storytelling and Building Bridges That Last

Before we continue, let me clarify something. While this book is about storytelling in business, that is not where my experience with the power of storytelling began. I didn't work at a marketing firm or on a sales team and *then* discover the power of stories.

My experience *started* with storytelling. Business was an afterthought.

As I said earlier, I told my first story when I was eleven years old. It was an assignment for my fifth-grade English class. I continued telling stories for entertainment at my church and then on the speech team in

high school. After graduation, I attended and told stories at storytelling festivals across the country. I attended storytelling workshops, retreats, and conferences. I sat at the feet of storytelling masters who, without any agenda, could captivate audiences of hundreds with nothing but the command of their narrative.

It was there, in the presence of story and storytelling in its purest form, that I first witnessed its irresistible power: a power that effortlessly includes all three of the bridge-building elements of attention, influence, and transformation.

Storytelling and Attention

I recently enjoyed a lunch with marketing executives in higher education. They were lamenting the abysmal attention span of their customers, namely, seventeen-year-olds, and it appeared as though my suggestion to tell better stories instead of focusing on using the fewest words possible was causing some internal chaos. One gentleman, tempering his frustration, asked, "So how do you suggest we incorporate a long-form story when our audience has an attention span shorter than a goldfish?"

The question was a good one but flawed. First, the whole goldfish thing is a myth.

Second, it implied the message recipient was at fault, conveniently shifting the blame away from the message creator. Maybe people don't pay attention because your hashtags don't matter IRL (in real life).

Finally, and most importantly, the question revealed the subtle belief that the marketer's relationship with an audience's attention has to be a challenged one. But, in fact, when done correctly, attention doesn't have to be stolen or wrestled away. It is given. Freely, willingly, and in many cases, without the audience realizing it's happening. This ease of attention is one of the great strengths of storytelling.

When you choose a story as your bridge-building solution, you gain access to a point of leverage unique to storytelling: the storytelling process is a co-creative one. As the teller tells the story, the listener is taking the words and adding their own images and emotions to them. Yes, the

story is about certain characters in a certain setting, but listeners will fill in the narrative with their own experiences until the lines between the message and the recipients are blurred. Researchers have explored this aspect of storytelling, calling the experience of losing oneself in a story "narrative transportation"[1] and even claiming one of the negative aspects of storytelling is, when we are truly transported into a story, we lose awareness of our immediate surroundings.[2] If you've ever missed your exit while listening to a story-driven podcast or audiobook, you understand these effects all too well. And think about it. In that moment, did you feel coerced into surrendering your attention? No. You traveled willingly into the world of the story. And it is at this point that attention metamorphizes into something much more valuable: captivation.

Captivate your audience with a story and, much like I found in the Slovenian boutique, you will have access to all the attention you could ever need.

Storytelling and Influence

In addition to the captivating effects of a story, or more accurately, as a result of them, stories possess an inherent persuasive quality. Researchers have tested this as well, determining that, as audiences lose themselves in a story, their attitudes change to reflect the story minus the typical scrutiny.[3] (More on that scrutiny in chapter 4.)

With story, resistance dissipates. With story, we don't need to taste the food to want to go to the restaurant or smell the cologne to want to buy a bottle. A story allows people to fall in love with the product, appreciate the value of the service, and feel compelled to act. When the Slovenian clerk started to tell us the Eight & Bob story, we didn't feel sold or convinced. We were willing participants and acted of our own desire. Which, I don't know about you, seems like a much more desirable way to cross a bridge.

Storytelling and Transformation

Arguably transformation is the most difficult element to measure, and it's where storytelling drops the mic. We know that story has an ability to transport the listener into the world of that story (attention). We know the more engrossed an audience is in a story, the more likely they are to adopt the perspectives within the story (influence). And for the final element, research has also determined that, once an audience emerges from the story, they are changed.[4] And not just for a minute or two; the effects are long-lasting.[5]

Have you ever left a movie theater and felt like the story followed you home and stayed with you for a while? Have you ever heard a story from a friend that weaves itself into the fiber of your being? I once shared a story with two friends about a girl I knew who lost her baby daughter in a tragic drowning accident. My friends still comment they will never forget that story, and now they drain their kiddie pools after every use.

This kind of lasting impact is not reserved for Hollywood and tragedies; it is inherent in all well-told stories. The Eight & Bob story did more than just convert; it turned Michael and me into converts. We were transformed by the story. We couldn't wait to tell it. To share it. We became like the sales clerk who had been just bursting to tell us the story. His desire to share it was as urgent and contagious as a cough and lasted much longer.

A story's transformative power can also extend beyond the recipient. Sometimes a story can transform the message itself. The task of bridging the gaps in business can appear to be transactional, with the goal being simply to get customers and stakeholders from point A to point B. It's easy to get caught up in the day-to-day functions and responsibilities, to lose touch with the bigger, more noble cause beneath it all, which—call me an optimist—I believe is always there, no matter how dry the work may seem to be. Refocusing the message on that noble cause taps into the transformative power of storytelling.

I once worked with a transit company whose sole purpose was moving

things from here to there, but they saw their work as being about helping customers keep their promises. Noble.

I've also worked with title companies who, on the surface, may appear to be the soulless *i*-dotters and *t*-crossers of the mortgage and home-buying process. But to them their work is what makes the American dream possible and allows people to confidently call a home their own. Noble.

In business, there is always more than meets the eye, something bigger at play. Telling the story of that something is the only way to bring it to life.

And telling that something-bigger story is exactly what Extra gum decided to do.

Extra Gum and the Ultimate Story Bridge

After extensive research and investment in consumer analytics, Extra knew without a doubt that in that critical two-second window in the checkout line most gum purchases were unconsciously made. In order to be the gum of choice, Extra had to connect with consumers in a real and visceral way long before they found themselves in the grocery aisle. Highlighting standard one-dimensional, nonemotional features like long-lasting flavor weren't enough to bridge the gap, so they decided to go bigger.

Through more research, they discovered one of the deeper, driving emotions for gum purchasing was the "social aspect of sharing it with others."[6] This isn't only true for gum; other breath-freshening options such as Tic Tac and Altoids also focus their product design to encourage sharing: a win-win. The mint owners gain social points for generosity, and the mint makers sell more mints. Essentially, just like a freight company is about more than moving things from place to place and title agencies are about more than stacks of papers and getting signatures,

gum, if you choose to see it as such—and more importantly, choose to *sell* it as such—is about more than long-lasting flavor.

Gum is about togetherness, closeness, and connection, all of which are pretty important to the human experience. If Extra could find a way to tap into that emotion, when their customers stared blankly at rows of gum, a flash of that greater meaning would cross their minds, connect them to Extra, and lead to a sale.

In 2015 Extra launched a two-minute video about a boy and a girl, Juan and Sarah, but the names didn't really matter. The gum didn't even really matter. What mattered was the story.

The video opened with a scene outside a high school. We catch a glimpse of Sarah. She is pretty in that "girl next door" kind of way, and while the camera focuses on her face, she smiles slightly. In the next frame we see why she's smiling, or rather who she is smiling at, namely, Juan, a handsome young man with kind eyes. He smiles back.

Moments later, we see Sarah at her locker and she drops all of her books. As fate would have it, Juan is there and helps pick them up for her. As a thank you, Sarah offers him a piece of Extra gum. It's one of the only times we see the gum in the video.

As the two minutes play out, we see Juan and Sarah's relationship evolve through several vignettes: their first kiss in the front seat of Juan's car, their first argument, the two of them falling in love the way high school kids do. Then we see Sarah at an airport. She's leaving. We see Sarah in a high-rise office in an unnamed city. Suddenly, like Dorothy and Kansas, we realize we're not in high school anymore. This is real life, and the glow from the beginning of the video is gone. It all feels cold as Sarah and Juan try to connect via video chat.

If you look up this video on YouTube and hover your cursor over the time bar at the bottom of the screen at this point in the video, you would see there isn't much time left for these two to figure it out. You would also notice it didn't take much time for you to care about them figuring it out. But we'll get to that later.

With only a few seconds remaining, the scene shifts. Sarah is walking

into an empty space. An abandoned art gallery, maybe? A restaurant with no tables? We don't know. Sarah seems confused too.

She looks around and notices a series of small framed pictures on the wall. She walks up to the first one. It's a sketch of a boy helping a girl pick up her books in front of a locker. Sarah smiles. We smile.

In the next frame is a sketch of a boy kissing a girl in the front seat of his car.

As Sarah passes each picture, we realize these are sketches of moments in Juan and her relationship, and we are reminded of the beautiful love Sarah and Juan shared.

Wait! Reminded? It's only been seventy seconds. That's barely enough time to process, much less be reminded of anything. And yet a sense of nostalgia washes over us. Nostalgia for Juan and Sarah or maybe our own love stories. They seem to blend together.

Sarah eventually comes to the end of the row of sketches.

I hold my breath as she steps closer to the final sketch.

Her eyes widen. It's a picture of a boy on one knee, holding a ring, proposing to the girl.

But wait! That doesn't make sense. Juan hasn't propo—

Our unconscious minds trail off, our jaws drop, our eyes burn as Sarah turns around to see Juan on one knee, holding a ring. They embrace and the video flashes back to that first exchange: a slight smile from a pretty girl to a kind boy. And now, here they are.

I've seen this video many times. It's pretty much required when you're writing a chapter whose arc is wrapped around this story within a story. That being said, the video gets me every time I watch it.

In fact, I am writing these words right now at thirty thousand feet on a connecting flight. I signed onto the Wi-Fi on my computer and cued up the video. Not really thinking about it, I pressed play and was immediately transported into Juan and Sarah's world. Two minutes later I had tears streaming down my cheeks and sniffed uncontrollably. (Typically, I'd feel self-conscious, wondering what the person sitting next to me must be thinking about the weeping person in 7A. But on this particular flight

the guy sitting next to me is an aggressive leg shaker and has been rattling the entire row for the past two hours, so I figure we're even).

It's also important to note, because I recently switched to an iPhone X, I don't have any headphones that are compatible with my laptop on this flight. So I was forced to watch the video of Juan and Sarah on mute.

Some might argue, after watching the video that it is the music that makes the story so compelling. But even as a silent film, the story struck a nerve in me. There was something about the unfolding of Juan and Sarah's story that brought me back. Watching it, I was suddenly a freshman in high school and remembering the thrill and the innocence and the beauty of when Andy K. smiled at me for the first time. Though our story didn't end in a proposal, the emotional stirring via a vicarious trip down memory lane is exactly what Extra was going for and overwhelmingly achieved.

It might be important for me to remind you at this moment that this story, this Juan and Sarah thing, was actually about gum. That thing you mindlessly buy and haphazardly chew. That thing that Extra, if it wanted to affect net-positive sales, had to connect to your emotions in order to interrupt your unconscious purchasing habits. So how do you emotionally connect people to gum? You tell them a story. The story of Juan and Sarah. And you subtly drop your product into the story. A piece of gum shared at the beginning and, oh, I forgot to mention it, because I barely noticed it. All of the sketches in that final scene are drawn on the inside of Extra foil wrappers. Yes, gum is there. But the story is about so much more.

When you actually tell a story, it always is.

Extra took the original video and created a variety of fifteen-, thirty-, and sixty-second versions. Since they knew the two-minute version would be the most impactful, they launched a significant digital ad campaign around the long version so that when the shorter versions were released on television, many viewers would have already seen the whole story.

The response was everything Extra could have hoped for: tweets, retweets, and Facebook posts, oh my! Ellen (DeGeneres) tweeted about

it, and YouTube viewers voted it as the ad of the year in the "Gives You the Feels" category.

While we all want social love, and likes, shares, comments and retweets are nice, what Extra was most concerned with was bridging the sales gap. The success of this campaign was measured entirely on whether or not people purchased packs of Extra gum. At the critical moment—the moment of gap-closing truth—did consumers *buy* Extra?

The answer? Yes, they did.

The two-minute video has been viewed over one hundred million times, and more importantly, Extra reversed their declining sales.[7]

Now *that* is a happily-ever-after if ever there was one.

From Why to How

The benefits of storytelling are compelling and real, and they, in effect, answer the why of this book. The reason you should want to bring storytelling to your business is that it is one of the most powerful business-building tools in existence. It captivates, influences, and transforms customers, stakeholders, talent, and beyond, closing the gaps in business with bridges that last.

But how is that so? How is it that something as simple as a story can be so powerful in business? To understand that, and to start the process of finding and telling your own stories, we need to travel to the source of where stories begin in the teller and the place where they find their home in the receiver: the brain.

CHAPTER TWO

Once Upon a Brain

Storyhacking the Nervous System to Captivate, Influence, and Transform

Story is the language of the brain.
–Lisa Cron, *Story Genius*

In the summer of 2014, the Maricopa Medical Center was in a bind. This was, to be clear, nothing new. County-and district-level hospitals are almost *always* in a bind. Not all hospitals are created equal, and if you run a county hospital in the United States, there's a good chance you're at the low end of the food chain.

The issue comes down to demographics. If you're wealthy and well insured or have solid coverage from your place of work, a county hospital

is not usually your first choice for treatment. If you're in a low-income bracket with little to no healthcare coverage or uninsured, a county hospital is often your only choice. Maricopa, like most county hospitals, is a health care safety net.

For all its county status, however, the Maricopa Medical Center in Maricopa, Arizona, has a remarkable reputation. For the nearly twenty thousand patients a year coming through its doors, there are numerous specialists and specialized units, including the second busiest burn center in the country, which has a patient survival rate of more than 97 percent. As Arizona's oldest teaching hospital, Maricopa is noted for cultivating incredible physicians every year. By almost any measure, Maricopa defies its small-scale, county status; it's busy, inspiring, and nationally recognized for excellence.

But like every county healthcare facility, it's also on a never-ending quest for cash. After all, it's hard to be a safety net for a community that is mostly poor and be flush at the same time.

Enter the Maricopa Health Foundation (MHF). While the hospital itself works to win public funds, the MHF's job is to raise private funds to support it. As part of that mission, MHF holds an annual fund-raising dinner called the Copa Ball. It's an important part of the foundation's efforts. But fund-raising in 2014 was worrisome.

Fund-raising for county hospitals is, by default, challenging. Unlike raising money for an arts foundation or a high-profile charity, the people who frequent the hospital, and therefore would be most likely to financially support it, are there because they don't have access to excess funds. Anytime the people who *use* a service aren't the ones who help *pay* for the service, fund-raising can get tough.

The previous year, the foundation had tried to address this by having physicians take the stage and talk about their work. The doctors spoke about the urgent nature of their work and how importantly they needed technology A or critical equipment B. At the end, the audience was asked to give a financial donation to the foundation.

Since the audience held a number of medical and local professionals,

the doctor presentations seemed like a good bet. Credibility? Check. Connection? Check. But *financial* checks? Not so much. The fund-raiser worked, but it fell short of what the foundation had hoped to raise.

This year there was an additional fund-raising challenge: a nearly billion-dollar funding bond was up for a vote in the state. In a conservative state, the bond was not wildly popular. Only top-notch marketing efforts and nonstop grassroots initiatives would get the votes needed to pass the bond. Of course, top-notch marketing and nonstop anything requires a lot of money. Which meant the people sitting in the ballroom the night of the 2014 Copa Ball had already been asked, on numerous occasions, to give money to support the bond marketing initiatives. Which subsequently meant whoever took the stage that year would be speaking to six hundred people who were already financially tapped out and weary of being asked.

When I met with the MHF, I was particularly concerned with the first problem: the gap between the predominantly low-income users and the predominantly high-income potential donors. The challenge, as I saw it, wasn't to simply convince people to part with their money by making a more convincing argument about how important things were. That was a rational appeal, but one that seemed doomed to be a repeat of the previous year's lackluster results.

The people attending the Copa Ball, I explained, weren't short on caring. And contrary to common belief, they weren't short on cash—people will always give to causes they care about. What the foundation needed to do was to close the gap between the donors and the hospital. We needed to make the donors see they weren't only funding an impersonal entity; they were funding *their* hospital, a hospital they cared about.

That, I knew, was a gap made for bridging through story, because as the MHF would soon discover, story has a unique place in the human brain.

Blubbering at Forty Thousand Feet: How Story Runs the Brain

Chick flicks are out.

That's what Paul Zak had told his bride some six years earlier. Take a girlfriend to those movies, not him. Give him prison or boxing flicks, Stallone or Schwarzenegger, not Nicholas Sparks.[1] But things changed on a late flight home to California, where, as Zak, a neuroscientist, articulated it, he "discovered that I am the last person you would want sitting next to you on a plane."

Exhausted after a five-day stint in Washington, DC, Zak ditched work and his laptop in favor of the tough-guy, Clint Eastwood–directed, award-winning film *Million Dollar Baby*. At the climax of the movie, Zak began to cry. And it wasn't just crying; it was uncontrollable weeping, or, as he described it, "heaving big sloppy sobs."[2]

In his work, Zak is credited with the discovery that oxytocin, a tiny neurochemical made in the hypothalamus of mammal brains, is more than just the bonding chemical for mothers and children. He showed it is synthesized in the brain by trust and that it motivates reciprocity. Oxytocin, he proved, is basically a prosocial chemical. It helps us bond, trust, and love. In fact, his work earned him the nickname "Dr. Love." After his dramatic experience on the plane, Dr. Love began to wonder if the brain releases oxytocin when we watch movies? Is that why we cry?

To find out, Zak worked with a group of graduate students to design an experiment in which subjects watched a video from a children's hospital. In it, a father talks about his two-year-old son, Ben, who has terminal brain cancer.

"The story has a classic dramatic arc," Zak wrote, "in which the father is struggling to connect to and enjoy his son, all the while knowing that the child has only a few months to live. The clip concludes with the father finding the strength to stay emotionally close to his son 'until he takes his last breath.'"[3]

Needless to say, the video is an intensely emotional story.

Another group also watched a video of Ben and his father, but one in which they spend a day at the zoo. It's touching in its own way but without the dramatic emotional pull of the first clip. Where the first is a story, the second is more descriptive coverage.

Zak's team measured oxytocin in the blood in both groups before and after the video and found that those who watched the first video—the one with the story—had a 47 percent increase in oxytocin.

It's what happened after, though, that matters for business. That's when oxytocin began to change behavior. Those who watched the first video were more generous toward others and gave more to a cancer charity. Story, in other words, made people better connected, more trusting, and generous.

But First, Attention . . .

Of course, you can't make any kind of impact on people unless you get their attention. You have to captivate in order to influence. You can't gain trust if no one sees you in the first place.

But story has us covered here.

In further experiments, Zak noted that people who watched public service announcements increased their donations to charity by 261 percent when their oxytocin and cortisol (which is correlated with attention) increased.[4] Just one factor alone wasn't enough to get those results: you needed both attention *and* trust.

What Zak had shown in the lab was the neurological basis for what storytellers have known for ages: stories focus your attention and forge bonds, based in trust, between people. In essence, Zak's research showed how story placed people at the intersection of captivation and influence.

Once you've caught people's attention with a little cortisol and once you have trust, thanks to oxytocin, people become more giving. But you don't need to drag people into a lab and dose them with neurochemicals

to influence their behavior. You just have to tell them stories. And that's exactly what MHF chose to do.

Storyhacking Charity

The format for the Copa Ball is like many charity events. A speaker delivers a short speech and then there's an ask, a request for donations. The checkbooks or smartphones with giving apps come out, and then another speaker takes the stage. It's like a small telethon, where performers do their bit and the host asks for donations.

This is an effective model only if the speakers deliver. My job was to convince MHF that simply having speakers endorse a cause and emphasize its importance wasn't enough. As in Paul Zak's studies, the key to more donations lay in using story to change minds and hearts, to increase attention and trust and, through that, generosity. Logic and credibility and rhetoric, I explained, weren't going to make the cause any more important than they had the year before. By using stories, though, we could hack the very neurology that connects people at a fundamental level and drives trust and generosity.

After meeting with the foundation, I suggested they should fill the speaking slate based on what kind of stories needed to be told rather than choose speakers solely by pedigree. Instead of choosing the people first, I suggested, choose the stories.

Armed with some story ideas in mind, the foundation went looking for speakers. And they found exactly what they needed, which, as it turned out, wasn't doctors. Instead, that year's speaking lineup at the Copa Ball included a former secretary of state, a young man who'd had serious facial reconstruction at the hospital, and a prominent local luminary.

As with the previous year, each person had credibility. They were a potential social and demographic match for the donors who would be at the event. But this year, the speakers had something even better: they had

stories. For the next few weeks I met with each of them to help capture and craft their stories for the Copa Ball.

When the evening arrived, I stood anxiously at the back of the room, nervous for the speakers but excited to have the sellout crowd of six hundred experience the same stories I'd heard and nurtured.

The first speaker of the evening had been a patient of the hospital years earlier. He was in his early twenties when he intervened in a bar fight with terrible consequences. He was severely beaten, his faced was crushed, and an orbital socket was broken.

When he arrived at Maricopa, it was clear he needed immediate surgery. There was just one problem: he had no insurance. Reconstructive surgery is prohibitively expensive. For an uninsured person barely out of high school, his ability to pay was essentially impossible. He would have to go through life disfigured.

The man explained how he told the doctor he had no insurance and couldn't possibly afford the surgery. "The doctor just put his hand on my shoulder," he recalled, "and said, 'We've got your back.'"

That night, under the stage lights or even up close, there was no way to see the steel plates the doctors at the Maricopa Medical Center had carefully placed beneath the skin of this handsome man's face. But everyone could see the slight mist that covered his eyes as he told a spellbound audience what it was like to know that, when you need it most, more than you ever will in your whole life, someone has your back.

When the ask happened, the response was overwhelming.

Betsey Bayless was the next speaker. A former secretary of state for Arizona, she carried plenty of credibility. She was also the former chief executive officer for the Maricopa Integrated Health System (MIHS), which was another challenge. It would be far too tempting and feel much safer for her to revert to a rhetoric she knew all too well: high-level corporate speak about the important work the hospital did and why it was

so critical to give. But Secretary Bayless took the road less traveled and instead told a story, not as a former CEO or former secretary of state, but as a daughter.

Some years earlier, her father had had a stroke. He needed immediate care. She didn't call the paramedics because she knew they'd take him to the closest hospital—an upscale, private facility. Instead, Secretary Bayless transferred her father from a wheelchair into her car and made the harrowing journey to Maricopa Medical Center.

"When we got there," Bayless recounted, "the doctor was waiting at the curb. When someone you love needs help, needs it desperately, you can't imagine how it feels to know that, at Maricopa, someone will be waiting there for you."

Once again, the audience responded emotionally and with donations.

The last speaker was Marilyn Seymann. A PhD with a decades-long career in finance and government, Marilyn was a well-known, well-respected Phoenix treasure. Her message, however, wasn't the standard lofty plea to give. Instead, Marilyn shared a personal story about the day she was strolling with a friend and was hit by a car. Unable to respond in the ambulance, she was not taken to the hospital of her choosing but to the closest one, which was the Maricopa Medical Center.

Marilyn told the story of the incredible care the physicians gave her. When it came time for the third ask of the night, the audience all but threw money onto the stage.

The evening was a phenomenal success. There was no shortage of tears, laughter, and goodwill. Just as it had reduced Paul Zak to tears at 40,000 feet, story had delivered an oxytocin current of connective emotion throughout the crowd. People were captivated by the stories of loss, hope, and redemption. The audience connected with the people telling the stories in a way they never had in the history of the Copa Ball.

In fact, it's not unreasonable to say that it was more than a simple connection, but instead a powerful synchronization. As Uri Hasson, a Princeton neuroscientist, has shown, the brains of storytellers and story listeners can actually synchronize.[5] Stories don't just make us like each

other; they make us *like* each other. They make us similar. Paul Zak observed, "If you pay attention to the story and become emotionally engaged with the story's characters, then it is as if you have been transported into the story's world. This is why your palms sweat when James Bond dodges bullets. And why you stifle a sniffle when Bambi's mother dies."[6]

Even without the action of James Bond and the impossible cuteness of Bambi, the Copa Ball tapped into the same brain processes. When the proceeds were tallied, the donations were more than double those of the previous year.

Lasting Change

The stories from that night's speakers were the bridge the organization needed. But even Paul Zak was a little confused in his study by how well storytelling elicited donations. "If you think about it," he wrote, "the donations are quite odd. . . . The money donated to charity cannot help these actors out of their fictional binds. . . . Nevertheless, oxytocin makes people want to help others in costly and tangible ways."[7]

What Zak was speaking of is the lasting effect of story, that is, the third part of effective bridge building, namely, the transformation that occurs from changes in the brain. Oxytocin in the brain, which is elicited by story, also activates another circuit called HOME (human oxytocin-mediated empathy). Among other things, that circuit uses dopamine, which is a reinforcement neurochemical. And dopamine helps us learn by giving us a little jolt every time something notable happens.

In other words, story can create lasting impacts because we remember better when we hear stories. This is one of the most compelling attributes of storytelling. Go back to a time before computer storage. Go back to a time before photographs, books, and even the written word, and you will find stories, told verbally and handed down from generation to

generation. Why? Because they were memorable. They lasted. A lesson taught in story was a lesson that could be recalled when it mattered.

A lesson learned can make all the difference in the evolution of a species. Or the life of a hospital. Because stories captivate and influence the brain, but they also transform it.

Or as Zak so eloquently put it, "The narrative is over, but the effects linger."[8]

Not Just Any Story . . .

There's one catch in all of this.

For all the power of story to captivate, influence, and transform the brain, there are two key things we also know from studying the neural impact of story. The first is that there actually has to be a story. If you've ever been to a conference, a Monday morning meeting, or anything involving PowerPoint slides and a lot of text, you know that not everything is a story.

Second, not all stories are created equal.

Some stories suck.

Actually, a lot of stories suck.

This is, in essence, the lesson that neurology teaches us about the brain and business: you have to use stories *and* they have to be good ones.

Which leaves us here: what exactly *is* a story and how do you tell a great one?

CHAPTER THREE

What Makes a Story Great and Beats Puppies and Supermodels Every Time

The power of storytelling is exactly this: to bridge the gaps where everything else has crumbled.

–Paulo Coelho

My grandma on my dad's side was a huge sports fan. Even as her mind failed her, she could remember the names and stats for every player on both the Minnesota Twins and Vikings teams. Eventually, she barely recognized her grandchildren, but she could still pick out a player by the way he walked on the field.

Sundays with my grandma were my first introduction to football. Years later, when Michael and I were dating, he'd want to spend Sundays on the couch watching football too.

That seemed to me the least interesting thing we could be doing with Sundays, that is, until Michael started telling me the drama behind the game. The trades, the grudges, the betrayals, the underdogs. As soon as I knew the stories, you couldn't pull me away if you wanted to. And trust me, there were moments when Michael wanted to. Apparently, yelling at the television is only appropriate at certain moments of the game, not the whole time. "That's what you get, Tony Romo, for dumping Jessica Simpson!" "Saints?! Saints?! What kind of a name is that?! I think they'll see you in hell for that shot at Favre." I even lost my voice and nearly got into a fight during Super Bowl XLIII, when the Cardinals were playing the Steelers.

What can I say? It's easy for me to get wrapped up in the tragedy and triumph of a great game. And I'm not alone. For Super Bowls, a good chunk of the nation gets involved in the drama. And if you happen to be the gambling type, that drama hits a whole new level.

The 2014 Super Bowl between the Seattle Seahawks and the Denver Broncos was a tough one for gamblers. Two-thirds of them wagered on the Broncos that day—a choice that turned out to be an expensive mistake. In what would become the worst day for gamblers in Super Bowl history,[1] Seattle crushed Denver and won the forty-eighth Super Bowl in one of the greatest upsets in the game's history. Denver, meanwhile, would set their own record for being the only team in the previous three decades to score less than ten points in a Super Bowl. Ouch.

For the majority of gamblers across America, the game was a disaster. But while the odds makers may have gotten the game itself wrong, one man managed to make a bet that *did* come true: he accurately predicted which ad would be the favorite of the 2014 broadcast.

What's $4 Million Between Friends?

The Super Bowl is a marketing phenomenon. Over a third of Americans watch the game in any given year—a staggering number. For sheer

eyeballs alone, it's an advertiser's dream. But the Super Bowl has some special mojo that other broadcast events don't: people actually want to see the commercials.

Crazy but true. If you've ever been to a Super Bowl party, you've experienced the bizarre phenomenon firsthand. It's one of the only moments in television when viewers get quieter when the ads come on.

For advertisers, the combination of total eyeballs and focused attention is marketing nirvana. Not only do Super Bowl ads get more attention than other ads—experts begin a running commentary weeks before the actual game—but brands get a certain marketing cred just for showing up. A Super Bowl spot gives companies and their anointed ad firms a cachet that can't be bought.

Except, of course, it *can* be bought. That's the point. And in 2014 the ads were running at a record-high $4 million per thirty-second spot.

Even with all those eyeballs, that's a high price tag when there really isn't clear evidence that Super Bowl ads lead to sales. Volkswagen claimed to get $100 million in free publicity from its admittedly awesome ad featuring a kid dressed as Darth Vader[2] (yes, sometimes a Darth Vader costume can work in a brand's favor), but calculating return is tricky at best. And even if you can do the math, an ad in the big game is still a gamble. Get it wrong, and you lose millions of dollars. More importantly, get it really wrong (GoDaddy, anyone?), and you lose face in front of a hundred million people. As with the oddsmakers, for the advertisers of the world, the Super Bowl is one big bet.

No doubt these things were on more than a few minds at Anheuser-Busch when they were making the ad "Puppy Love" for the 2014 Super Bowl. In addition to the standard high stakes, the brand also had a reputation to protect. Their Clydesdale-themed Super Bowl ads were perennial hits, nailing down a place in Ad Meter's Top Five more times than any other brand the previous decade.

That alone made the upcoming ad a good bet for favorite. There was no doubt Anheuser-Busch would be pulling out all the stops. And if you

dig into the ad, there are a lot of reasons to point to why anyone might think it would be a winner.[3]

First, it's insanely cute. I mean, it's centered around a Labrador puppy for heaven's sake. Beyond cute, though, the spot was directed by Jake Scott, son of famed director Ridley Scott, who, interestingly, directed the famous Apple "1984" ad that aired in Super Bowl XVIII. The humans in front of the camera, meanwhile, include a gorgeous former swimsuit model and actress and a handsome, rugged man. And then there was the song playing behind it all: the beautiful "Let Her Go" by British musician Passenger.

In short, there were a lot of great reasons to think the ad would score.

None of those, however, were what made Johns Hopkins marketing professor and researcher Keith Quesenberry think the ad would be a winner. He accurately predicted in advance that the ad would be a favorite, not because it featured cute puppies and hot humans, but because it used a story.[4]

All Hail Storytelling

Now, you're obviously reading a book about storytelling, and the kind of person who buys a book about storytelling is probably the kind of person who believes in the power of a story or, at the very least, is intrigued by the idea. And because you are either intrigued or invested in what a story is capable of, you are likely not surprised by the statement above: a commercial would be picked to win because it tells a story.

But this casual acceptance of story is the very source of the bridge-building, gap-closing problem we discussed in chapter 1. Storytelling has become a do-no-wrong term, a cure-all elixir, and as a result no one challenges it. Telling a story is obviously the answer.

It might surprise you to learn this is new, this blind acceptance of storytelling. Very, very new.

In December 2004, a full decade before the 2014 Super Bowl, the

only thing that stood between me and going home for a one-month break was my master's thesis initial defense meeting.

It's much worse than it sounds.

As a graduate student, you spend the first half of the year collecting and analyzing research and then writing a twenty-page preliminary paper on an idea you want to test in the second semester. The defense is a meeting with the key professors in your department who, for no less than an hour, drill you on your research and the idea you want to test. Do well in the initial defense and you're given a blessing to continue. Do poorly? It's your academic time-of-death.

My thesis examined the role of storytelling in organizational socialization. I wanted to determine what role, for better or for worse, stories played in building the culture of a company. Today, this topic wouldn't raise an eyebrow. Everyone is exploring company culture, and storytelling is generally accepted as something that happens or should happen or is happening. But in 2004 that wasn't the case.

I don't remember what I wore. I don't remember everyone who sat in that room. But I'll never forget the thickness of the air as I took my place at the head of the boardroom table. One of the professors, my thesis advisor, welcomed and thanked the rest of the attending faculty, but before she could even motion to, much less mention the grocery-store pastries we had provided, one of the professors said, "I disagree with the premise of your thesis."

I didn't watch much *ER*, but even I knew this was the equivalent of the ominous moment when the beeping oscilloscope turned into a steady, alarming, one-tone sound. She's flatlined! The patient is dead. Cue sad music.

The room was silent. Everyone stared across the pastries at me. The professor continued, reading directly from the document I had spent weeks, yes, but also a lifetime writing.

"Humans are storytelling creatures by nature." No, he mocked.

"Cultures use stories to make sense and create shared meaning." No, he said.

I spent the next hour fighting for storytelling, for its validity, for its role in our lives, in our work, in what it means to be human. That it is a phenomenon worth studying, a skill worth investing in. I posited that we tell stories to remember. We tell them to cooperate. We tell them to entertain. We tell stories to teach, to share, and to survive.

The fact that we homo sapiens are the evolutionary winners in the race to still exist is actually *because* of our ability to tell each other stories. Our ability to tell stories is what enabled us to "not merely imagine things, but to do so collectively." These are the words of Yuval Noah Harari in his 2015 *New York Times* bestselling book *Sapiens*. It only took 24 pages of the 443 for him to mention storytelling.

"The ability to speak about fictions is the most unique feature of Sapien languages . . . such myths give Sapiens the unprecedented ability to cooperate flexibly in large numbers," which means we "can cooperate in extremely flexible ways with countless numbers of strangers."

Harari admitted, "Telling effective stories is not easy. . . . Yet when it succeeds, it gives Sapiens immense power, because it enables millions of strangers to cooperate and work towards common goals. Just try to imagine how difficult it would have been to create states, or churches or legal systems if we could only speak about things that really exist, such as rivers, trees and lions."[5]

I've never met Harari. I'm hoping I'll run into him on the street someday. I've already planned what I will say: "That book was amazing. Why couldn't you have released it six years earlier?"

That is when I really could have used that book. That's when I needed the ammunition. When I was sitting in that university boardroom alone, surrounded by powerful faculty who essentially held the fate of my future in their hands. They had the power to let me continue my research or send me all the way back to the beginning. Do not pass Go. Do not collect $200. And delay my life indefinitely because they didn't believe in—and I couldn't convince them of—the importance of storytelling.

I'm not sure what I said that day. Fortunately for me, whatever it was,

it was good enough, and I was allowed to continue to pursue my thesis and graduate on time.

Though I was the only one in the room fighting for the efficacy of a thesis on storytelling that December day, ask any early twenty-first-century storytelling advocate, and they'll tell you the value of storytelling, particularly in business, was once a tough thing to defend. It shouldn't have been, but it was. The general consensus then was that more information meant better decision making. The secret to making business work was to give consumers or team members or people more options and more information about those options.

Business was all about logic.

And then suddenly it wasn't.

The Story Emperor Has No Clothes

Several years ago I was sitting in a neighborhood coffee shop, MacBook Pro on the table, earphones in place, trying to get some work done. But I knew better. If I really wanted to get any work done I would have gone to a library or at least a different neighborhood's coffee shop. Instead, I chatted with the dozen different people I knew from a dozen different places and accomplished nothing.

Just about the time I started to feel guilty for paying someone to watch my kids while I socialized, an acquaintance walked in. He was a commercial real estate developer I'd met through the spin studio where I worked out. We had a friendly conversation and discussed which spin classes we had (or in his case *hadn't*) attended that week. When he asked what I was working on, I mentioned storytelling. He knew this was something I was involved with and had, in fact, read some of my work.

"Actually," he said, "I just bought a book at the airport about storytelling. I think I need to become a better storyteller."

I knew the book he was talking about; there was really only one out at the time. I also knew that book wasn't going to help him much. Sure,

it used the word *storytelling* a lot. It even included examples of what most of us might think were stories. But after reading it, you'd be left with the same questions you had when you dropped the twenty-five bucks to buy it. What is a story? And how do I use one in my business and life?

When I asked what he thought of the book, he shrugged. It was all right, he said. I could tell he was disappointed, and I wasn't surprised. I remember thinking in that moment there was still a lot of work to be done on making storytelling in business more accessible. More doable.

I wish I could tell you what's changed since then. Why, in a few short years, storytelling went from something you took children to the library to hear to something that was rolling off the tongues of Gary Vaynerchuk and Richard Branson. Maybe it had something to do with those first twenty-four pages of Harari's bestselling book. Whatever the reason, suddenly everything was all about storytelling! Companies were thinking about storytelling. Social media was all about stories. Story was a *thing*.

Facebook posts were stories.

Mission statements were stories.

Websites had entire tabs dedicated to "Our Story."

Taglines were stories.

In some cases, simply saying the word *story* constituted a story. And no one challenged it, because it's all about story.

I won't soon forget the day I walked into a Walgreens in 2018 with my two kids. My seven-year-old son had had one too many encounters with the monkey bars on the playground, and his hands were a mess of blisters in varying degrees of popped-ness. Gross.

With swim team practice an hour away, we were in desperate need of waterproof bandages. We were on a mission, but that mission was immediately thwarted when my son insisted he needed to use the facilities. As I stood outside the bathroom door, something caught my eye.

It was an endcap. I'm not even sure what the product was; I could only see one panel from where I was standing, guarding the men's room door. But the bold words "Our Story" jumped off the packaging. Curious,

I abandoned my post, walked three steps to the endcap, and picked up a box to read the story I was promised:

> hydraSense® transforms the pure, refreshing power of seawater into gentle comforting hydration. Every drop of seawater in our hydraSense products comes from the Bay of Saint-Malo, France, where powerful tides and currents constantly renew the seawater, creating a wealth of naturally occurring minerals. We then take this mineral-rich seawater, purify and desalinate it to isotonic levels for optimal nasal comfort.[6]

What? *That* is a story?!

I don't think so.

Let's pause here for a second. You've heard an actual story before, right? Someone read you stories at bedtime or you. Your friends got together for happy hour and exchanged stories. Every holiday crazy Uncle Tom tells the same fishing story. Your spouse went on a business trip and called to tell you about a particularly harrowing incident at a TSA checkpoint. Right?

You've heard a story.

Let me ask you, did the copy on the hydraSense product in any way resemble the stories you hear in your life?

No!

It didn't. People don't talk like that. And on the occasions they do talk like that, they certainly wouldn't characterize it as a story. Your friends wouldn't say, "I have a story for you" and then recite the items on their grocery list. (If they do, get new friends.)

Herein lies the problem.

In its rise to acceptance, popularity, and buzzword status, we've lost track of what a good story is.

Don't get me wrong. I love that storytelling has become a buzzword in business. I love that people are at least aware there is a place for story in marketing, sales, and leadership. It's a wonderful thing that few seem to disagree with the premise of strategic storytelling. But there is a downside.

In the drastic swing of the storytelling pendulum, we've gone too far. Now we think everything is a story. Now, if you click on the link that says "Our Story," there's no telling what you'll find. Now, when someone says, "This is our story," what follows could be dates, résumé bullet points, ingredients, who knows what else. I've seen salespeople stand in front of a room and say, "Let me tell you the XYZ company story," and then proceed to flash dates, statistics, and an infographic or two onto a projection screen. I want to stand up and object, just like the professor did in my thesis defense meeting.

Yes. Stories are extremely powerful.

Yes. You should be telling stories to do business. And sometimes we do tell stories to do business.

But stories, somewhere along the way, became known as brands. And somehow we forgot that, no, not everything is a story.

When you look at the advertising, meetings, pitches, and boardrooms of the world, you quickly realize one thing: despite the acceptance of the concept, there's still a lack of actual storytelling in business.

And then, every once in a while, a real story is told, and we remember it.

When a Story Really Is Told

In 2017, I needed a new pair of glasses.

I'd heard of Warby Parker. It seemed like what all the cool kids were doing, so I thought I'd give them a try. Ten days after my appointment and choosing my frames, the glasses arrived at my home.

I opened the box, opened the case, and there they were: a beautiful new set of frames and a little Warby Parker-branded hanky to help keep the lenses clean. The hanky wasn't branded with the Warby Parker logo but rather their story. A real story:

Warby Parker in 100 Words

> Once upon a time, a young man left his glasses on an airplane. He tried to buy new glasses. But new glasses were expensive. "Why is it so hard to buy stylish glasses without spending a fortune on them?" he wondered. He returned to school and told his friends. "We should start a company to sell amazing glasses for non-insane prices," said one. "We should make shopping for glasses fun," said another. "We should distribute a pair of glasses to someone in need for every pair sold," said a third. Eureka! Warby Parker was born.[7]

There it was. An actual, rare story.
Just like the biggest Super Bowl commercial of 2014.

It's Not About the Puppies

Spoiler alert: Neither Anheuser-Busch nor Keith Quesenberry needed to worry about their bets. Bud scored big with "Puppy Love." In fact, the ad was rated as the most popular ad not just that year but in the history of the Super Bowl.[8] Better still, it was the most shared ad of the game, with consumers spreading the word about it more than the rest of the top ten combined.[9]

But why? That was what Quesenberry and his colleague Michael Coolsen of Shippensburg University were curious about. To find out and to make their bet on "Puppy Love," they analyzed two years of Super Bowl ads. What they discovered was what made the difference between the top of the polls and the bottom was whether an ad told an actual story. Story beat out sex appeal, humor, celebrity power, and even cute puppies. Quesenberry observed, "It doesn't hurt that the marketer is using a cute puppy, but 60 seconds of a puppy playing with a Budweiser bottle would not have been a hit."[10]

Quesenberry seems to be on to something. If you compare top ten and bottom ten lists, both ends of the ad spectrum take runs at the things you might think would engage viewers: cute characters, great music, humor, and high production value. But only the great stories make the cut.

And therein lies the big question. What the heck *is* a great story?

What It Takes to Tell an Actual Story

Philosophers, writers, readers, and critics have argued about this over the years. For Quesenberry, great story is characterized by something called a five-act structure, which was popularized by Shakespeare. There are seven-act models, nine-point hero's journeys, and w-plots. There are things like prologues and rising action and denouement. There is a never-ending supply of story theory, each more complicated than the other. And this is all fine if your objective is *Hamlet*.

But I'm going out on a limb here and guessing that you, like me, are not trying to write a new Shakespearean masterpiece. I suspect you are more concerned with getting a company off the ground or a product into someone's hands than creating a saga for the ages. You barely have time to proofread your emails, much less conjure a complicated hero's journey.

If that is the case, you're in luck. Great storytelling isn't as complicated as you might think. If what you're trying to do is close some gaps to make your business better, you need a simpler model. No Shakespeare required. You need something you can use at a networking event or toss in a social media post or implement at your next team meeting. You may not be Budweiser or Spielberg or Hemingway or Shakespeare, and you don't want to be. You don't have $4 million to spend, but the stakes are just as high.

What you need are the four essential ingredients that make a story a story.

And a simple way to put them together.

And you have come to the right place.

The Four Components of a Great Story

In 2018, my team at the Steller Collective, a firm dedicated to the study, creation, and education of strategic storytelling, decided to put our understanding and story methodology to the test. We wanted to know, without a doubt, what was needed to tell an effective story. What made the difference between a message like the one Warby Parker prints on their lens cloths and the weird one that hydraSense prints on their packaging?

We created a survey designed to test the effectiveness of different types of brand messaging. The hypothesis was this: messages that include certain story components would be more compelling than messages that lacked these components. The components we tested were the ones I'd been inserting into wannabe-story messages for decades:

- Identifiable characters
- Authentic emotion
- A significant moment
- Specific details

Let's break each of these down a little more to ensure we understand them, because once we master these four components, we'll be well on our way to the story promised land.

Identifiable Characters

If you've read any storytelling books before, you've probably read the term "hero." If this is your first storytelling book, you've likely seen motivational messages on Instagram telling you to "be the hero of your own story." And, yes, while the idea of a hero is a classic one, when it comes to telling stories in business, I find this term to be extreme, intimidating, and a little confusing. The word *hero* suggests you need to have done something epic (or at least be dressed in a fancy costume and have wavy locks) in order to have a story to tell. This couldn't be farther from the truth.

What every story actually needs is much simpler than that.

We don't need a hero. We need an identifiable character. Someone we care about and identify with.

To be clear, a character is not a company name. It is not a value someone is committed to. It is not even a large mass of people or even a small group of people. A story needs a single or several single, separate characters we can identify with and connect to.

In "Puppy Love," there are plenty of them, animal and human. Puppies are easy to care about. A man who cares about a puppy? Yes, we are completely okay with that character. An enormous, powerful horse who befriends a tiny puppy? Yep.

Your software? No.

Your soap? No.

Your widget, service, or doodad? Nope.

Unless you turn those things into characters, like M&M's, they're just products. We need a character. Not a hero. An identifiable character.

Authentic Emotion

Another component we believed was essential was the presence of authentic emotion. A list of events or occurrences does not a great story make. A static time line is not a story. The emotion doesn't have to be overly dramatic; it can be as simple or common as frustration or wonder or curiosity. But it needs to be there.

Additionally, and for clarification, emotion does not refer to what the story receiver experiences, but rather the emotion felt by the characters or inherent in the circumstances of the story. It is through that emotion that the story receiver experiences empathy with the story. No emotion means no empathy; no empathy means reduced impact of the message.

Or so we hypothesized.

A Significant Moment

The third component to an effective story is a moment. A specific point in space, time, or circumstance that sets the story aside from the

rest of our existence. It's a way to take what might otherwise be a broad, generic description and zoom in tight to allow an audience a better view.

Put another way, remember actual maps? If there was a big city with lots going on, the map often included a few insets, that is, magnified portions of an otherwise sprawling space. That is what a moment does for a story. It homes in on a particular piece of an otherwise sprawling experience or insight. Instead of going big and broad, we need to go small and detailed.

For example, I was recently working with the executives of a private school in New York City who were trying to differentiate themselves in the most competitive educational environment known to man. (My kids go to school in New York City. I have hives just writing this.) They wanted to create a message around the opening of a new international branch of their school in South America. As we got started, their would-be stories included phrases like "It was just so amazing to see the kids experience a different culture . . ." "It was like nothing I'd ever seen . . ." And then they stopped. That was the story, basically the whole map. And because there was no zoomed-in, magnified moment, it was all forgettable.

To fix this, we shifted their language and clarified some moments. Instead of speaking in general terms, they each focused on one incident they had witnessed of a student immersed in a new culture. For one executive, it was during lunch in the cafeteria. The executive expanded on the moment and described watching the kids try new foods and laugh together when the spice of a particular sauce proved too spicy for one of the visiting kids. For another, it was watching the American students negotiate play on the playground. For another, it was walking through the doors of the school on that first Monday morning and noticing how uniquely different the lobby smelled. Zooming in on the act of walking through the doors was what set the moment apart from just a general discussion of being at the school. Each of those moments served to narrow the focus. From there, they could expand on the experience in a general sense, but the clarity of the moment was critical to the effectiveness of the story.

Often, where messages that are intended to be stories go wrong is they stay too vague, too high level, too broad, too general. For a story to be compelling, it should include a specific moment in time or physical space. This component, along with the fourth component, which we'll discuss next, aids in what I call the co-creative process. Where the listeners actively engage in creating a version of the story in their own minds, and in doing so, the story sticks longer.

Specific Details

The specific details component involves the use of specific, descriptive, sometimes unexpected details and imagery that are relevant to the intended audience in an effort to create and draw the listeners into a world that sounds familiar to their own. The finer the detail, the better.

A recent NPR podcast showcased the work and legacy of marketing genius Tom Burrell. In 1971, Burrell founded one of the first all-black ad agencies and changed the way the world thought about advertising with his slogan: Black people are not dark-skinned white people.[11]

It wasn't uncommon in those days to film two versions of a commercial, one for a white audience and one for a black audience. But instead of developing a unique script for each one, they would write just one script and then film a white version with white actors for the white audience and a black version with black actors for the black audience, completely ignoring the cultural nuances that didn't translate or resonate from the one to the other. The commercials always missed the mark.

Burrell pioneered work in advertising that rewrote scripts to make them familiar, relevant, and believable to African American viewers. The Marlboro man wasn't a cowboy out on the open range but rather a black man in a sweater in an urban city center, and the ad garnered a huge response. Burrell's work was groundbreaking and a perfect example of the importance of using specific details as a way to connect with intended audiences by creating scenes and scenarios familiar to them.

The strongest, stickiest stories are those that master this final component. Using specific details in a story is a way to illustrate how well

the teller knows the audience. If, for example, you're telling a story to a 1980s audience, a detail could be a boombox. If you're telling a story to an audience made up of a lot of parents, a detail could be wrestling a stroller into the trunk of a car. Each use of a detail signals to the audience how deeply the teller understands them and builds a strong connection between the audience and the teller and the message.

Specific details have the additional benefit of engaging the imagination of the audience. This component pulls the audience deeper into the world of the story, a world that, if done right, will look and feel familiar.

Execution of this final component is a sign of a masterful storyteller. For example, Michelle Obama can thank the specific details component for her speech of a lifetime at the 2016 Democratic National Convention. All politics aside, what made the now former first lady's speech so powerful was the use of story and, most importantly, her masterful use of the specific details component to draw Americans in and drive her message deep into their psyche.

The story started strong when, at the 1:16 mark, the former first lady used the moment component to take her audience to a very specific point in time: "A journey that started soon after we arrived in Washington. When they set off for their first day at their new school. I will never forget that winter morning."

She then included a few specific details of her daughters departing for their first day: "I saw their little faces pressed up against the window."

And there it was. Sending your kid to school for the first time is a moment filled with emotion, a moment likely burned into your memory if you're a parent. Whether you put them on a bus or drove them there yourself, you likely watched your children's "little faces" and saw your life flash before your eyes.

Don't have kids? No worries. You no doubt remember the first time you set off for something new and can match the emotion. In either case, by choosing a detail many people in her audience could relate to, Michelle Obama put everyone on the same page and in the same emotional place.

With those few familiar details, she commanded the room and the country.

Putting Story to the Test

Once our team had these four components in place, we meticulously administered a national online survey of 1,648 respondents administered by Edison Research. Respondents, all of whom were parents, were presented with two messages: a generic control message about a children's toy product called Builder.co and a randomly selected version of a message about the same children's toy that included either one, two, three, or all four of the components listed above. Additionally, the order in which the two messages, generic or storied, were presented was rotated in order to counteract recency and latency bias.

After reading each one, respondents rated how compelling they found the messages. Respondents were then asked to choose which of the two messages they found more compelling, more entertaining, more memorable, more persuasive, and more captivating.

I must admit, when the survey was released into the world, I felt a sense of unease and flashed back to my thesis defense. Would our hypothesis be supported? Is this really what makes a great story?

I will also admit to some celebration when the results came back with an overwhelming "yes." In all cases, even if the message contained just one of the components, it performed better than the message with none of the components. Additionally, the more components the message contained, the more dominant the story became. Sixty-three percent of those surveyed said the story with all four components was more compelling, entertaining, memorable, persuasive, and captivating than the message with none, which, incidentally, was a message that sounded a lot like the brand messages we've gotten used to hearing.

These results should be particularly exciting to you. I mean, yes, if you happen to know Jake Scott, have $4 million, and can get access to

the best ad agencies, dog trainers, and horse whisperers in the business, maybe these findings don't matter much to you. You can probably just pay other people to understand story for you.

But what if you don't have those things? How do you create a message worthy of the Super Bowl?

Well, now you know. The reason the Budweiser ad fared so well, according to experts and now confirmed by our research, had more to do with story than anything else. And story costs nothing. It simply requires a few key components.

What you have now is a simple checklist of what your story needs. You don't need millions of dollars. You don't need outrageous conflict or some complicated journey (the Builder.co story was about a dad who wished he could spend better quality time with his kids). All you need is a character, some emotion, a moment, and a detail or two to create a sense of familiarity, and 63 percent of people will find your message more compelling than if you didn't.

Now that you know the essential and tested components of what makes a great story, all that's left is to put those components together somehow. I've got you covered there as well, and per the usual, I'll keep it simple.

The Steller Storytelling Framework

"A story has a beginning, a middle, and an end." I can still hear Mrs. Carlson, my third-grade teacher, saying from the front of the room. She was giving us one of the earliest writing assignments I can remember. I later wrote something about a zebra, and allegedly that notebook still exists somewhere. Who could have guessed that my third-grade composition lesson would still be with me today? And Mrs. Carlson was not wrong. Beginning, middle, and end are the building blocks of any story, and business stories are no different. But there *is* a more descriptive way of approaching these three literary acts. After all, we're not in third grade

anymore. From now on, let's try thinking of them as *normal*, *explosion*, and *new normal*.

The first time I heard a story described this way was at a storytelling retreat with my favorite storyteller, Donald Davis. When he laid this groundwork, or something very similar, I felt as if all of the stories I had ever lived or told made sense. He put words to what my storytelling heart had always known but never knew how to say. It may sound cheesy, like an over-the-top storytelling love story, but it's true. That simple framework influenced every story I've told or worked on since, and I hope it will do the same for you.

Let's take a closer look at each of these story pieces.

Normal

A bad story has a single defining characteristic: we don't care. Even the flashiest of colors, the biggest of budgets, or the cutest of puppies can't make us care. They might get our attention, but they can't make us invest emotionally. They can't influence and transform. Fortunately, the majority of the time, the root cause of this disconnect can be traced back to a single mistake: leaving out the first part of the story. The normal.

For example, this is why we can watch the local five o'clock news every night without bawling our eyes out. The news usually starts in the middle of the story—the robbery, the fire, the car accident. Although each of these instances is worthy of tears, the broadcasters don't have the time to tell us anything about the people (the identifiable characters). We don't know who the people are. We don't know what emotions they were thinking about or hoped for or felt before tragedy struck. We don't know anything about them, and so we don't care.

To tell a good story, one your audience will care about and invest in, you have to start off strategically by establishing the normal. The way things were before something changed. The normal is where you take a little bit of time to include the key components of a story: introduce the identifiable characters and their emotions. This is also where you include

a few details that create a sense of familiarity for the audience, lulling them into a sense of security.

They let down their guards. They put themselves in the characters' shoes.

Done right, throughout the process of the normal, the audience is saying to themselves, "I recognize that person. Yes, I understand what this is about. Yes, I can see how they would feel that way." The guy on the plane who left his glasses. A couple falling in love. A young, future American president with charm who had to have that amazing French cologne. We'll talk more about the normal throughout the next section of the book, but for now know that this is the most important part of the story. The normal is where you include the components. The normal is where you give your audience a reason to care. The normal is the part most people leave out, which is why their stories don't stick.

Explosion

Admittedly, the word *explosion* is a little aggressive. It implies blood or injury or fire. That is not necessarily the case in your story, though. The explosion, for our purposes, is simply the happening. It could be a big thing or a small thing, a good thing or a bad thing. Most importantly, it's the moment things change. Perhaps it is a realization or a decision. It may be an actual event. Whatever the case, the explosion is the point in the story where things were going along as normal in the normal and then suddenly they are different. Good different, bad different, doesn't matter.

For now, remember:

Normal: Things are how they are.
Explosion: Something happens.
New Normal: Things are different.

New Normal

The third and final phase is the new normal. This is where you share with your audience what life is like now, after the explosion. You

tell them what you know now, why you are wiser or stronger or how you improved (or are still trying to improve) as a result. It could be a moral. It could be when a client lived happily ever after after using your product or service. It could include a call to action. However it comes together, the new normal is why storytelling works as a strategy to convey a point or enhance a message and not just to entertain. The new normal is what makes a story worth listening to in business.

Just the Beginning . . .

So cute puppies, hot cowboys, sexy models, touching songs, and talented directors don't guarantee great stories. Despite what some may tell you, a mission statement isn't a story. A brand isn't a story. Marketing jargon isn't a story. Additionally, a story doesn't have to be complicated. Introduce a few characters, paint a picture using a particular moment in time with specific details and the emotions involved, and you're on your way to story success.

The next question, of course, is, which stories should you use? There are an infinite number of them. Where do you even start?

There are four key story types that appear over and over again in business. They are the stories that illustrate not just what you offer but why and how. No matter what the gap is in your business, one of these four stories will be the bridge you need.

Sometimes the best way to learn to tell a great story is to see others at work. Each of the following four essential stories has its characters and its audience. Each has a purpose in your business. You don't need to create all of them at once. But when it comes to the infinite universe of possible tales, understanding these four types of business stories will help you decide not only which ones to tell but how best to tell them.

That's what we'll tackle next.