



Telling Stories Takes Courage, Brains and Heart

By Brad Ritter, APR and Janet Ritter, APR

A few years ago, a major trade magazine profiled a prominent CEO. The writer portrayed him as a successful, polished executive deftly leading a company on the move. This CEO was a wizard of quotes, antidotes and business acumen.

That was then. Today the magazine's subscribers might wonder if the executive's public persona was merely smoke and mirrors. What changed? The magazine did a follow-up interview that it ran as an audio podcast on its Web site.

The CEO stuttered and stammered his way through responses that should have come effortlessly. An unidentified voice was heard prompting him with answers. The once high-flying executive displayed little passion for his business and bored the audience with a monotone delivery style.

It was like Dorothy finding out the mighty and all-powerful Wizard of Oz was just a man behind a curtain. In print, the CEO came across as an icon. But his failure to understand and master the nuances of audio interviews – critical to success in today's multi-media environment – left him humbled.

Dramatic growth of teleconferences, videoconferences, audio and video podcasts, electronic press kits, multi-media blogs and even company-wide voicemails should remind executives – and their PR counselors – that all business is ultimately show business. Leaders are performers, with some spending more time on stage than many card-carrying members of the Screen Actors Guild.

They can no longer hide behind dictatorial employee memos, predictable customer letters and obtuse shareholder reports. Increasingly, executives are the face, personality and brand of their organizations, during good – and bad – times.

Their success depends on telling their stories to stakeholders down the hall and across the globe using multi-media tools conceived, in some cases, long after their days in business

school. Fortunately, the techniques to conquer these new technologies are timeless, and executives who master them will effectively convey their messages, regardless of the medium.

History is full of great communicators who crafted stories and used their voices and personalities to tell them, ultimately influencing their audiences. Franklin D. Roosevelt calmed a frightened nation during World War II with his confident, steadfast tone delivered via fire-side chats on the radio.

Walt Disney, who built an empire on the concept of storytelling, used 1950s television to create demand for a new type of family entertainment park. In the 1980s Lee Iacocca restored confidence in Chrysler with the simple message: "If you can find a better car, buy it!"

But rarely does a compelling story just happen. And while some great storytellers are born, most are made. Creating and telling stories is a five-part process. Follow it, and your stories – and your storytellers – will win rave reviews.

1. Create likable characters

Villains create drama, but they rarely succeed in the end. Audiences will only respond favorably to a spokesperson that they like. They also must believe a spokesperson is sincere before they can trust the message. Vocal delivery, appearance, facial expressions, body language and mannerisms all determine whether a spokesperson is liked and believed.

2. Develop a compelling story

Good stories are engaging, memorable and entertaining. Real-life examples reinforce messages and convey concepts, and they are particularly effective in audio programs. While most public relations materials are written in a straightforward, factual style, blogs, teleconferences, podcasts and videos succeed with a more conversational style.

3. Rehearse

Anyone who has tried to sing and dance on stage knows a performance is doomed without rehearsals. Record practice sessions to help identify strengths and weaknesses, including unintentional "uhms" and "ahs," as well as vocal fillers, such as "you know." Videotaping also detects visual saboteurs, such as unpleasant facial expressions, nervous mannerisms and distracting jewelry or accessories.

4. Coach the performers

Today's top sports and show business stars use coaches and trainers to improve their performance. Likewise, presentation coaches provide objective analysis, ideas and support to leaders and other spokespersons. Coaches are often brought in before important meetings or tapings, when an executive's presentation skills reflect poorly on the company or hinder professional advancement.

5. Tell the story passionately

A conference call, webcast or in-person presentation must be viewed as a performance. Spokespersons need to understand they are playing a role, but in most cases, there are no re-takes or second chances. Today's skeptical, multi-tasking and impatient audiences need to feel the storyteller's passion, energy and enthusiasm. Spokespersons should expect to feel exhausted after giving a powerful performance.

In the end, the gifts required to succeed as leaders and spokespersons today are the same as those given by the Wizard of Oz to the Cowardly Lion, the Scarecrow and the Tin Man: courage to embrace emerging communications methods, brains to develop a clear, effective message and heart to deliver it with passion.



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