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Storyselling

By Jim Busch

The heart of selling is communication. The sales person's job is to engage a customer's attention and convince them that the product being offered will provide a benefit that exceeds the cost of the purchase. This is easier said than done. Just because we are speaking, we aren't necessarily communicating. Communication is a two way street; the most powerful radio station in the world is useless if no one turns on their radios. As sales people we need to say something that will get customers to "turn their radios on". We need to engage the customer's attention so that they will hear what we have to say about our products. Once we have the customer's attention, we must make them understand how our recommendation can help them. Before they will commit to a purchase, they must visualize how our product will help them. This is why automobile sales people encourage potential car buyers to take a test drive. Putting the prospect behind the wheel for five minutes will do more to help them imagine owning the car than even the most eloquent sales presentation. Selling advertising is a bit more challenging. Advertising is both an intangible and a tangible product. Though the customer can see and touch our papers or click on our websites, they can't see the real value of our product until after they make a purchase. To close a sale we have to help them visualize the additional customers they will attract by advertising with us. One of the most powerful tools we can use to help prospects see the benefits of advertising is the well-told story.

Our love of stories sets the human race apart from the other species that share our planet. Stories have enabled us to share our experiences and learn from the experiences of others. Most creatures can only learn from their own personal experiences. The ability to vicariously relive the experiences of others through their stories greatly accelerated the human race's ability to adapt and grow. From prehistoric firesides, to Aesop, to the latest episode of Law and Order, we are hard wired to listen and learn about our world through stories. Recent FMRI (Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging) studies have discovered that the most ancient portions of the human brain are stimulated and activated when we listen to stories. Stories literally engage us at the deepest level of our being. By incorporating story-telling skills into our sales presentations, we can tap into the human love and need of story to help prospects see the value of advertising with us.

How stories work

Stories make abstract concepts real to the listener. The person hears the story and imagines themselves experiencing what is being described. A well-told story

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affects the person hearing it almost in the same way as if they had experienced it themselves. Good storytellers establish a context for the listener to draw them into the story. For example, if I am trying to show a prospect how advertising can help them attract new clients I will say,

“Mr./Ms. Customer, has your spouse ever said, ‘Where do you want to go to dinner tonight?’ And you both drew a complete blank, where did you turn to help pick a restaurant?” What this does is helps the customer imagine themselves in the role of the reader. It makes the readers real to him. This is much more effective than saying “my research indicates that...”

Personalize your message

People respond to other people. This is why when fundraisers want to raise money for the treatment of a disease; they show a person suffering from that disease. We respond emotionally to the one child in braces standing with Jerry Lewis on the Telethon, but a statistic about the thousands of children suffering sails right past us. Numbers are important, but to really engage someone you need to “put a face” on your message. For example, if I’m talking about the response to an ad, I would tell a story about the readers. “I can imagine a mom and dad sitting in the kitchen listening to the kids whine about how bored they are when dad sees an ad for your swimming pools.” Once you’ve established this context you can reinforce it with facts and figures. “My paper reaches 8,000 of those moms and dads in their kitchens.” The circulation figures may be hard for the prospect to grasp, but he knows that the “mom and dad” are his/her customers.

Personalizing the story enhances your message. I will often share a personal story, “I know that when my wife and I are looking for furniture, we look for...” This not only helps the customer visualize how consumers will react to the ad, but also has the effect of building rapport by sharing your own experience.

Proving value

My dad used to say, “Never ask a barber if you need a haircut.” As sales people everything we say is suspect. The customer is bright enough to realize that you are there to sell them something. Using third party stories adds credibility to your message. If I say, “I know my ad will produce results for you” the customer is probably thinking “of course you do.” If on the other hand I say, “I work with a number of plumbers just like you and they’ve told me...” or even better, “Joe’s Plumbing told me that after a month of running with my paper, he was up 20%”. These are forms of social proof. Theoretically, the prospect could check out the veracity of your statements with the people mentioned (though they never do). Since the subjects of the stories are in a similar situation to themselves, it is a short leap to imagine themselves getting the additional business.

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Tell your own stories

When you meet with a prospect you are not only selling your product but you are also selling yourself and your company. Blowing your own horn can come off a bit egotistical and self-serving. You can use a story to get this point across in a more believable manner. By sharing a story of how you helped a customer you demonstrate the quality you wish to project. For example, instead of telling a customer about the great service you deliver, you could say, "I have a customer who doesn't like to come up with his own ads, so each week I prepare three ideas for him and all he has to do is choose. It's a little extra work for me, but I know my customer is really busy." "I'll give you great service" could be taken as an idle promise, telling this story helps the customer understand your level of commitment. The phrase "I know he is busy" demonstrates your empathy for the customer's position.

Story questions

I sometimes use stories to frame a question. I've found that simply asking a customer "What sets your business apart from the competition?" will often elicit a shoulder shrug and a comment like, "We're pretty much like everyone say, "Imagine I'm the worst comparison shopper in the world and I have you and all your competitors sitting around a big table and ask, 'Tell me one reason why I should do business with you rather than these other guys?' What would you tell me?" The response to this question, usually gives me a headline for the customer's ad.

I also like to ask questions that prompt the customer to tell me their stories. Questions like, "What led you to get into this business?" or "tell me about your best sale ever". This is a great way to show interest in the customer and to build rapport.

Using stories to counter objections

Stories are an effective tool to counter sales objections. As described above you can tell stories of other advertisers to prove value. You can also use stories to change the context and give the customer a different perspective. For example, when a customer challenges me on the cost of a program, I often tell a story about buying a washing machine with my wife. I tell the prospect how I wanted to buy the machine that was on sale, but the salesperson convinced me that the higher priced model was better constructed. I concluded the story by telling him the machine lasted over twenty years and proved to be the best decision in the end. The "moral of the story" is that you get what you pay for. I then ask the customer to tell me about the people that complain about his/her prices. Rather than confronting the customer and arguing, I try to get agreement on the importance of value over price. By engaging the customer with story, you get them thinking more deeply about what they are saying.

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Telling good stories

Like any other skill, storytelling takes some thought and practice. Here are some key points to remember about story telling:

Tell only true stories—You can change the names and dates, but tell real stories. If you don't believe your stories, the customer never will. Use stories from your own experience and the experiences of your co-workers, friends and advertisers.

Prepare—collect as many stories as you can. When you are speaking with other people, listen for stories you can use. Ask your co-workers to tell you about their experiences. The more stories you have in your bag, the more effective you will be.

Structure—Think about the “arc” of your stories. Your story should set up the situation, express the problem and then tell how the problem was solved.

Practice—I often think of selling as performance art. I rehearse the things I say on sales calls and this includes the stories I intend to use. I observe the effect my stories have on customers and adjust how I tell them until I get the results I want.

Engage the customer—Modulate your voice and use your hands when telling a story. Include details to make it easier to visualize. Your goal is to make the customer relive the event you are describing in their mind.

The end of the story

Story telling, like selling, is about making a connection between two human beings. In my long career I have noticed that great sales people are usually also great storytellers. I do not believe this is a coincidence. Someone once said that the shortest distance between two people is a story, by closing distance between you and your prospects you will make more sales. Learn to use stories in your presentations and you will sell happily ever after.

This article was written by Jim Busch of the Pittsburgh Pennysaver.

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