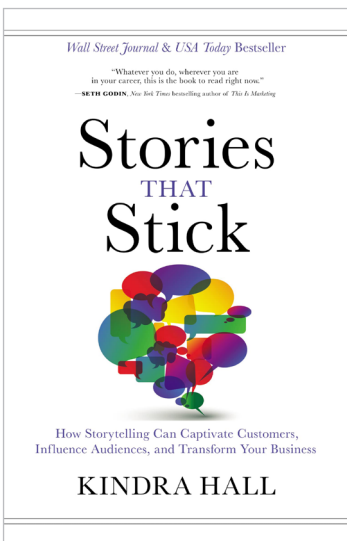


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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Stories That Stick

THE SUMMARY

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Introduction

In my work I see 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 that 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.

PART 1: THE IRRESISTIBLE POWER OF STORYTELLING

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

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 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,

Stories That Stick

between recruiters and prospective employees, between managers and employers, 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.

Often there is a 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 and is the result of a unique leverage point no other form of information exchange has: 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. It is at this point that attention metamorphizes into something much more valuable: captivation.

Captivate your audience with a story and you will have access to all the attention you could ever need.

The benefits of storytelling are compelling and real, and they, in effect, answer the why of this book. Storytelling 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.

2. Once Upon a Brain: Story-hacking the Nervous System to Captivate, Influence, and Transform.

Paul Zak, a neuroscientist, 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 pro-social chemical. It helps us bond, trust, and love.

While watching the climax of the Clint Eastwood-directed, award-winning film *Million Dollar Baby*, Zak began weeping uncontrollably. He began to wonder if the brain releases oxytocin when we watch movies. Is that why we cry?

To find out, Zak designed an experiment in which one group of subjects watched a film clip with a dramatic arc—a father struggling to connect with his dying son. The other group watched a clip with the same father and son spending a day at the zoo. The first film was a story, the second was more descriptive coverage.

The oxytocin in the blood of the first group was 47 percent higher than the second group. Also, 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.

Stories That Stick

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. Story has us covered here too.

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. 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.

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 businesses: 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?

3. What Makes a Story Great? (And Beats Puppies and Supermodels Every Time)

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

You've heard an actual story before, right? Someone read you stories at bedtime. 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?

Now we think everything is a story. If you click on the link that says "Our Story," there's no telling what you'll find. Dates, resume bullet points, ingredients, or who knows what else. 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.

Great storytelling isn't as complicated as you might think. What you need are the four essential ingredients that make a story a story. And a simple way to put them together.

Once we master these four components, we'll be well on our way to the story promised land:

Identifiable Characters: We don't need a "hero." We need an identifiable character that we care about and connect to. (A character is not a company name. It is not a value. It is a single or several single individuals we can identify with and connect to.)

Authentic Emotion: A list of events or occurrences does not a great story make. A time line is not a story. The emotion is not what is experienced, but what is felt. It can be as simple or common as frustration or wonder or curiosity.

Stories That Stick

A Significant 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. If there is no zoomed-in, magnified moment, it was all forgettable.

Specific Details: 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 you're telling a story to a 1980s audience, a detail could be a boombox). Specific details engage the imagination of the audience. This component pulls the audience deeper in the world of the story, a world that, if done right, will look and feel familiar.

"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. But there is a more descriptive way of approaching these three literary acts: *Normal*, *Explosion*, and *New Normal*.

Normal: *Things are how they are.* A bad story has a single defining characteristic—we don't care. We don't bawl our eyes out during the five o'clock news because the broadcasters start in the middle of the story—the robbery, the fire, the car accident—and don't have time to tell us anything about the people involved (identifiable characters). Establishing the normal is the most important part of the story so your audience will care about and invest in what happens.

Explosion: *Something happens.* It could be a big thing or a small thing. It is the moment things change—a realization, a decision, an event. Good different, bad different, doesn't matter. Whatever the case, the explosion is the point in the story where things were going along as normal and then suddenly they are different.

New Normal: *Things are different.* 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 lives happily ever after. 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 entertain. The new normal is what makes a story worth listening to.

Where do you even start? There are four key story types that appear over and over again in business. No matter what the gap is in your business, one of these four stories will be the bridge you need.

PART 2: THE FOUR ESSENTIAL STORIES—THE TALES EVERY BUSINESS NEEDS TO TELL

4. The Value Story: How Storytelling Drives Sales and Marketing

The most important gap any business needs to bridge is the gap between what they offer and the people who, whether they know it or not, need it. To capture the attention of the buyers, to convince them that, yes, this is the solution, and eventually to transform them into repeat users, customers, buyers, believers. When it comes to sales and marketing, the *value story* is king.

While offering more information may seem like the way to make an obvious decision more obvious, the reality is that this approach often muddies up an otherwise easy yes. And while more data or details or logical explanations are often what the audience expects you to say, if your goal is to convince them of the value of what you're offering, the facts may do more harm than good. Why? Because they simply make our brains work harder than they need to, or for that matter, want to.

Stories That Stick

People don't buy the *thing*. They buy what the thing will *do* for them. In order for them to do that, you have to tell them a story. That story is the value story.

A customer or prospect has a pain or a problem. They're struggling with it, they're dealing with it, they're trying to figure out a better way. Normal. Then you or your company comes along. They customer engages with your product or solution or service. Explosion. Now, life is better. The pain is cured, the problem is solved, and the customer is so much better off than before. New normal.

What makes a value story really strike a chord is the inclusion and execution of the four story components:

When it comes to great storytelling, research indicates having an actual, identifiable character for the audience to connect with and relate to is key. It is a critical point of distinction between a strong story and a weak one. The greatest mistake of marketing is to put what you offer at the center of everything instead of the person you offer it to.

You don't even need to talk about the product. We don't need to see it or totally understand it. All we need to understand is that the product changed the course of the identifiable character's life, and subsequently, how it could change our own.

Imagine your customer in bed at night staring at the ceiling. What keeps them awake? What issue is worrying them, concerning them, stressing them out? Once you recognize the emotions of your potential customer, then the next step is how do *you* fix that feeling?

While including a character and emotion will help to draw the audience into the scene, the best value stories include a specific moment in time the audience can see vividly and specifically. Things had been going along as normal, and then suddenly, in this moment, things changed. It's the moment the solution is discovered, the moment the real value of the product or service is realized.

And at the center of it all, what really matters is knowing your customer. When you tell stories to potential customers, don't be afraid to get specific with your details. Each specific detail you include builds a scene that looks and feels familiar to the audience, and in doing so, they will say to themselves, "They get me." This is a step you cannot fake.

5. The Founder Story: How Entrepreneurs Use Story to Attract Money, Customers, and Talent.

Every business has a founder story. A story of the who and the how it all began. A story about the moment when an idea first struck. A story from the moment the founder realized it might actually be a business. There are no exceptions.

When it comes to a new product or idea, you're selling yourself as much as anything else. However, there are plenty of challenges, pitfalls, and ways a founder story can go wrong.

Pitfall # 1: *Confusing the Founder Story and the Value Story.* When you're just talking about the product, you're selling the product, not yourself. When you're telling a founder story, first and foremost, you're selling yourself.

Pitfall # 2: *Not Telling Your Founder Story Because You're Tired of Telling It.* Think about actors on Broadway—the lines they say are always the same, but they understand their performance isn't about them. It isn't for them. Your story may feel tired to you from time to time. But shift your focus from you to them. Yes, the story might be about you, but telling it is not. It might sound old to you, but to the person hearing it for the first time, it's as new as the day it happened, and your audience will love hearing it.

Stories That Stick

Pitfall # 3: *Thinking You Can't Tell the Founder Story When You're Not the Founder.* Anyone can tell a founder story. The secret is this: the story stays the same, only the transition into the story changes a bit. Founder stories need as many voices telling the story as possible.

Pitfall # 4: *Letting the Reluctant Founder Shut Down the Founder Story.* Founders are often hesitant to share their story for fear it looks dated or self-glorifying, or insist the story isn't about them but rather "the people and the company and the customers." *Do not* accept these reasons—they sound perfectly noble, but they are irrelevant.

Fortunately, when you include the essential storytelling components, this story basically writes itself. At its core, the great strength of the founder story centers around an identifiable character, the founder.

As we learned from our research, including emotion in your story is essential to making it more relatable, compelling, and sticky. Simply stating the order in which things occurred will not connect with an audience in any meaningful way. Your first step to adding emotion is to consider what your audience cares about. The key to making the founder story great is to balance the negative emotions (adversity, defeat) and the positive emotions (determination, relief, pride).

The easiest, most-often overlooked component of the founder story is the moment. Many neglect to identify a specific point, place, or moment and instead make a broad-stroke allusion to time in general. Even something as simple as a date, a day of the week, or the weather outside will satisfy your audience's need for a moment.

Depending on what you know about the audience to whom you are telling your founder story, you will include unique details to help them connect their experience with yours. Rely on details specific to your audience.

Ultimately, the power of a founder story is its ability to humanize the business the founder started. To remind people that behind the building or logo or bank statement is a person who started it all. My hope is you choose this story as your default opener. Instead of leading with facts, figures, or information, the story needs to start with the people behind the company.

6. The Purpose Story: How Great Leaders Use Story to Align and Inspire.

One of the most versatile of our story types, purpose stories can bridge all kinds of gaps. At their core, purpose stories are about alignment and inspiration. And the larger an organization gets, the more those two things matter. Together, alignment and inspiration create purpose, and you need both to make progress. Fortunately, a purpose story can align teams in a variety of ways and for a variety of reasons.

There is very little room for error when it comes to matching the message, the ultimate point you wish to make, with the story you end up telling. If you tell a story that doesn't perfectly illustrate your message, if you tell a story that leaves your listener wondering, *What was the point of that?* you will have committed the ultimate storytelling crime: telling a story for the story's sake. Not meticulously matching your story to your message could backfire in extremely detrimental ways. Instead of being perceived as an inspirational leader, you run the risk of being labeled an arrogant one.

It sounds easy, right? Just clarify your message and find a story to match. And yet, if you've ever tried it, it's a lot harder than it seems. Although there are no shortcuts in life, there is a simple way to uncover your purpose story and lure it out of the mental caves in which it tends to hide. Once you're clear on the message you want to deliver, the next step is to ask yourself: When did I learn this lesson? When did I discover this truth?

Stories That Stick

More so than with any of the other essential stories—whose main characters are sometimes customers, as in the value story, or sometimes a stakeholder telling the founder story on behalf of the founder—the identifiable character in a purpose story is almost always the storyteller. The leader who learned the lesson. The person who had the experience. While you can tell a purpose story about someone else, the best ones are about yourself.

An effective way to blend the experience of the identifiable character (you, the leader) with the experience of the listener is to lean on emotions. What makes a purpose story work is not how clearly you can recite the sequence of events. The success of your purpose story is dependent entirely on your ability and willingness to share how you felt about these events. These emotions don't have to be big. In fact, indifference is often the primary emotional state. What does need to be big—the bigger the better, really—is your willingness to be vulnerable, to share things about yourself. The root of social connection lies in vulnerability.

Your purpose story will be more compelling if it includes a specific moment in time. I find, with purpose stories in particular, the moment often coincides with the explosion as you learn a lesson, gain a new perspective, enter a new normal. The moment may occur in a split second, but in the story it should feel a little bit like slow motion—when you zoom way in and take your time.

The success of a purpose story hinges on the leader's ability to make a story that is technically about him or her feel like a story that's about the audience. With that in mind, whenever possible, build in audience-universal truths. Include specific details, situations, emotions you know the majority of your audience is familiar with. The use of specific details helps blur the lines between the identifiable character (the leader) and the audience until they become one and the same. And in that moment, your purpose becomes their purpose.

7. The Customer Story

You already know the customer story well. You've seen its echoes in things like testimonials, reviews, influencer endorsements, referrals, and recommendations. The long history of customers praising (or panning) products is a pastime that keeps on giving.

Customer experiences have a natural edge over traditional marketing because they come preloaded with what a marketing value proposition lacks: credibility. When you tell someone your product is great, that's called marketing. When another customer tells them, it's called a referral, and referrals carry a whole different level of clout.

A customer story draws people in, makes them care, feel connected, and perhaps most importantly, makes them feel understood. For example: "Someone else, like me, has felt the way I've felt and wanted the thing I've wanted and found the solution here. I want that. I'll buy it."

Customers with problems whose problems are solved could be perceived as value stories, but the key element that makes a customer story is the person telling the story. We might have the same characters. The same explosion/product. The same outcome. The same value. The difference is the customer is telling the story—not the company—and that difference makes all the difference.

The customer story is in a world of its own because it eliminates the nagging voice that questions whether or not you can believe a story if it's the seller telling it. With a customer story, it's not the company, it's a person—just like you—who tried it and loved it and has nothing to gain by telling you. The source matters.

Stories That Stick

The identifiable character in a customer story is *the customer*, and there is nothing more authentic than the emotions that naturally flow from a customer whose life has been changed by what you offer. But more valuable than the emotions they felt after experiencing your product or service are the emotions they felt before. Customer stories live and die based on the emotions that are shared in the normal of the story. The joy or relief they felt (authentic emotion) after finding you only matters when placed in contrast to how they felt *before* finding you.

Specific details are what give the customer story its irresistible ring of truth. The offhanded comments or specks of reality so small they risk being written off completely. Of course, you know he/she would never do that; you now know better.

PART 3: CREATE YOUR STORY-FINDING, CRAFTING, AND TELLING YOUR STORY

8. Finding Your Story

Even if your stories are small, you have them, and they are worth telling. Good story finding is a combination of both collecting and choosing.

Story collection is about generating story ideas without regard for whether they're any good or appropriate or useful or even tellable.

Getting stories can involve asking questions. Ask yourself lots of questions to uncover stories you may have otherwise forgotten. Ask questions of others—you may find that getting better stories requires asking better questions. Instead of asking questions about a general experience, ask questions with nouns—about people, places or things. Or put your phone away and watch stories unfold before your eyes.

Now that you've collected some story options, you have to choose which story to craft and tell. *Story choosing* involves picking one that fits your needs, your business, and your audience.

Your audience is key: Who are you telling this story to? What do you want them to think, feel, know, or do? The art of choosing a story is all about knowing where the audience and your objective meet. Look through the moments you've collected, and choose a story that sits in that intersection.

My archive of stories is not neat. It's not pretty. And I vow to get better at it someday. But however you choose to do it—planner, notebook, phone app, scrawled on napkins or the back of receipts—take a moment to make note of the stories that are happening around you so that you'll be more likely to remember these story scraps should the time come when you need them.

9. Crafting Your Story

Once you have a collection of story ideas—the seeds of potential stories you can use to captivate, influence, and transform—and a singular story idea that you chose for the job at hand, your next job is to craft that story in a way that makes it compelling for the person who will read it or hear it.

Rest assured, you can do this. Crafting great stories is a simple skill that anyone can master. You may remember our storytelling framework from chapter 3: Normal. Explosion. New Normal.

Stories That Stick

Start in the middle. The explosion is where our stories usually begin. When a story happens to us, more often than not, we don't recognize it until we're in the middle of it. Which makes sense, because we don't notice a story happening until we get to the explosion. We don't really notice the normal until we see it in contrast with the explosion and new normal.

Start with the explosion, the thing that happened, and then work backward. Once you identify the pivotal moment to build the story around, it's time to go back to the beginning.

Crafting the normal is the most fun and most important piece of the story process. This is where you take a happening and make it matter. This is where you get to make your audience care. Additionally, this is where you get to flex your empathetic muscles, where you simultaneously say, "I know you" and "You know me." This is where the listener or reader of your story settles in, lets down their guard, and if you do it right, blurs the lines between their world and yours long enough for you to bridge the gap.

This is the part we humans love. Your audience will enjoy that subtle sense that, while everything appears to be going along as planned, something is about to happen. And with your particular audience in mind, include details so it sounds familiar to them. Throughout the whole story they should be saying to themselves, "*I've felt that. I understand that. That sounds about right. Yep. Yes. Yes. Yes.*"

And then when the explosion hits and the solution is found or the lesson learned or the realization is had, the next natural response of the audience, much like in *When Harry Met Sally*, is, "I'll have what she's having."

If you get the rest of the story right, the new normal writes itself. It's the recap of the lesson learned and what it means for the person hearing the story. As you craft the new normal, it's up to you how blatant you want to get about the message. The most important piece of crafting the new normal is to use it as an opportunity to come full circle. End the story back at the beginning, except with the benefit of the knowledge, wisdom, and understanding you didn't have in the normal.

That's all you need to start crafting your stories. Like with anything, practice will make you better. Over time, either through external feedback or your own, you'll get a sense for what works and what doesn't.

10. Telling Your Story

If a tree falls in a forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound? It's an age-old question. If you find your story and put the effort into crafting it, but you never tell it, does it even matter?

When it comes to storytelling, simply knowing all the things you've learned thus far does you no good. Knowledge is not power; it's just wasted brain space if you never actually tell your story.

The good news is that your opportunities for storytelling are endless and ever-growing. When in doubt, tell a story. Tell them in emails and email campaigns. Leave a story in a voice mail. Tell them in meetings. Tell stories in webinars. Tell them online. Be the one who people look forward to hearing from, even if they can't quite put their finger on why. You know why. Because people love stories.

Here is one final, surprising truth about storytelling. When you have a great story to tell, the telling simply becomes an afterthought. When you have a real story to tell, the telling is as natural as waking up. Get the story right and the telling will come.

Stories That Stick

But only tell the stories that feel right to you. Tell the stories that are ready to be told. Your stories are your own. My hope is that you will choose one that feels right to you. You'll take a chance, and you'll tell it. All you need is to get out of your own way. Almost all the problems in storytelling aren't so much story problems as they are problems with the teller getting in the way of the story. Find a real story that resonates with you, and it will almost tell itself.

Conclusion: Happily Ever After Is Just the Beginning

I realize that storytelling can be daunting. Sometimes we don't have a single idea. At other times we have so many that the paradox of choice keeps us frozen in place. It's easy to be intimidated by the blank page or the full auditorium. There are days when even the best storytellers freeze. The way forward is always the same. The way forward is simply to begin.

Remember that stories are a way to make sense of things that have happened or might happen. It isn't just something we do or need. Stories are what we are.

When it comes to storytelling in business, you're not reinventing the wheel, you're dipping into the current of story that runs through our heads and our lives all the time. And that's a current worth dipping into—in business and beyond.

In fact, a 2016 study by some researchers at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and SUNY Buffalo found that people who are good at storytelling are also more attractive. Results from this study specifically concluded that women find men who are good storytellers to be more attractive and better long-term partners. The researchers surmised this was because "storytelling may be more likely to influence others or to gain positions of authority in society."

Whether at home with your family, trying to find a mate, or getting ahead in your career, story is the way to do it.

After all, storytellers get hired. They win the contract. They make the sale. Get the boy. Get the girl. They survive the onslaught. They hold court. Capture attention. Win accolades. Move to tears. Storytellers close the gap.

Become one and you will close the distance between what you have and what you want. You want to shrink the space between where you are and where you want to be in business and life.