

## Why We Use Stories

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We've spent a lot of time in this series on the elements of storytelling, how it works, its history, and so on. But we haven't really talked about the reasons why we tell stories, so I thought I'd take a few minutes here to share some thoughts on the six reasons we tell stories.

The first reason is to **persuade** one or more people to do something that they otherwise wouldn't do. Not because they don't want to, but rather because it didn't occur to them, or they didn't feel capable, or they just weren't sufficiently comfortable to undertake the task. For example, Joe Candido and I recently worked with a client who fundamentally knew that the adoption of a particular technology would revolutionize her business, but because the technology represented a radical departure from the current IT strategy, she was opposed to it. By creating a story that we shared with her that painted a rosy picture of what might transpire if she were to put her support behind the technology, she was persuaded to do so. The result was powerful – and profitable.

**Defense** is a second reason to tell stories. Storytelling is all about the art of demonstrating what could be, but it can also be used to defend what is. For example, an executive chooses to go down a particular path that isn't necessarily the most popular. But executives get paid to make hard decisions. By telling a compelling story to supporters and detractors alike, the decision can be justified, the supporters get ammunition, and detractors (at least the ones who are willing to think) hear a different twist on the theme that might make them reconsider or at least temper their objections to the decision.

**Convincing**, the third reason to tell stories, is different from persuading. Whereas persuading someone to do something is all about creating a cogent argument through a sustained effort, convincing is all about causing someone to believe in the truth of whatever it is you're trying to get them to do. For example, there's a commercial on TV right now about the fact that there are too many unwanted pets in the country and as a result they are being euthanized in alarming numbers. Viewers are **persuaded** to give money to the organization largely because they use heart-wrenching photographs of animals that are suffering. Inhibitions to give are broken down through a combination of a celebrity host, melancholic music and sad but powerful photographs. On the other hand, another commercial that I recently saw shows happy pets in good hands, and declares that a donation of X dollars will place several pets in good homes, thus reducing the problem. That is a more **convincing** argument because it is rooted in logic, not emotion. Both work, both are effective, but they are different.

We **compel** people or organizations to action when we make a case that they cannot ignore or refute. Compelling arguments are those stories that irretrievably hook the listener and gently (or not so gently) force them to take action.

We often tell stories to **create an emotional response**. Emotions are rooted deep in the non-logical part of the brain and are therefore difficult to control – or to escape from. A story can make a person angry, sad, frustrated, happy, joyful, expectant, thoughtful, melancholy, wistful, and so on. Think about what a powerful weapon a good story is, to be able to control someone's emotions like that.

Finally, a story can be used to **entertain**. This doesn't necessarily mean that the story has to be funny; it just has to hold the audience's attention as it is told. For example, if you haven't seen it, watch the [talk that Ken Robinson gave at TED](#) back in 2006. Notice how he uses humor. His subject is quite serious – the decline of creativity in schools – and he punctuates moments of serious material with funny stories that serve to break up the flow and give the viewer an opportunity to take a breath and rest for a moment before continuing.

Stories are powerful tools that require administration of the Spiderman Protocol. With great power comes great responsibility, so wield the power wisely. I say this with my tongue firmly planted in my cheek, but I'm not kidding. Storytelling is a powerful compelling force; use it accordingly.

Thanks for reading.