

Create Compelling Business Stories in 3 Simple Steps

By Jonathan Kranz

Stories aren't just for campfires and school children: they're a powerful way for businesses to communicate their value, to create an emotional hook that sticks in their prospects' imaginations.

Think, for example, of how Nordstrom has used the story of the no-questions-asked money-back refund to the customer who returned an old tire – even though Nordstrom has never sold tires. It's cemented the department store's reputation for outstanding customer service. Or the story of how two determined engineers, Bill Hewlett and David Packard, pioneered the development of Silicon Valley from a tiny garage in California; that anecdote has become the foundation of HP's reputation as an innovative, entrepreneurial organization.

Stories can make a business. Yet most businesses remain tongue-tied, not because they don't have stories to tell, but because they don't know *how* to tell them.

Good news: you don't have to be a writer to create an effective business story. In fact all it takes is three simple steps, what I call, "3D Story Telling."

Step One: State the DESIRE

Why did the chicken cross the road? Because it wanted something on the other side, be it shade, food or a rooster. Desire is the engine that drives a story, the force that gives the story its momentum. In order for a story to begin, someone has to want something.

Many of the best business stories feature customers – people your prospects can empathize with. So begin there; think of a recent success you've had with a client. What objective, goal or dream did they have? What did they want? And why did it matter?

Here's an example drawn from real life:

St. Jacques, an advertising, marketing and design agency in northern New Jersey, wanted to rise above a pack of similar service providers by finding a clear, distinctive focus. Its mission: to brand itself as THE resource for franchise marketing.

Step Two: Articulate the DANGER

"Boy meets girl, boy gets girl" is not a story. "Boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy goes through hell and high water, then boy gets girl" is a story. Danger – a risk, threat, impediment or obstacle – is the absolutely crucial next step in any story. Without it, there's no friction, no emotion.

But danger makes too many of us weak in the knees. We've been told, time and again, to state the positive. Point to blue skies. Put on a happy face. But to create an effective story, you must articulate the challenges that stand between the hero of the story and the object of desire. In fact, the more intimidating those challenges are, the better.

For St. Jacques, the danger looked like this:

But St. Jacques had almost no name recognition in the franchise industry and few franchise contacts. Worse, it faced entrenched competition from larger agencies who had been established in the franchise market for years. How could they make St. Jacques a credible presence among skeptical insiders?

Step Three: Introduce the “Magic Sword”

It’s a simple 3D formula: desire plus danger equals DRAMA. Now you can introduce the “magic sword,” that device, like Arthur’s Excalibur or Siegfried’s Nothung, that allows your hero to reach his desired object. In your business story, the magic sword is your product or service – the thing your customer bought from you that helped them accomplish their goals.

This is the beauty of telling business stories: once you’ve stated the desire and the dangers that stand in the way, you’ve created a *meaningful context* for your product or service. Within a story, your business offer has a reason for being, a compelling emotional necessity.

At this stage of the story, your job is to show how your product and service overcame the dangers and achieved the desired goal. This is what happened to St. Jacques:

St. Jacques collaborated with a research firm, Princeton Research, and a writer, Jonathan Kranz, to create the Big 30 Benchmark Report of Franchise Marketers. Based on direct interviews with more than thirty marketing executives at the nation’s top franchises, the Benchmark Report identified the most important marketing challenges franchisers faced and offered practical suggestions for improving communications, marketing and sales. The report’s impact was overwhelming: promoted via email, mail and the Web, it rapidly led to new clients, a full pipeline of leads, favorable press coverage and positive recognition from the IFA, the leading professional association for franchise organizations.

It’s that simple

Desire. Danger. Magic sword. It’s really that easy to shape a memorable business story that stays in your prospects’ minds. In fact, you can distill your story into just three sentences:

- So-and-so wanted...[fill in the desire].
- But...[state the danger that stood in the way].
- That’s why they used...[put in your product and service]...that helped them...[describe what your product or service did].

Once created, you can use your business story as the foundation for a case study, press release, Web page, white paper or even as an effective introduction to a brochure, report or speech.

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Article written by Jonathan Kranz of Kranz Communications, www.kranzcom.com,
jonkranz@kranzcom.com.