

# Why tell a story?

Stories are memorable in ways that dry factual statements aren't, particularly when people are listening to a number of other people for the first time all telling them what they do.

Any idea that the story is not as accurate as the factual information (even if that is true) is irrelevant if the choice is between being remembered and not being remembered.

The point of telling a story is, therefore, often to be remembered.

However, there are a few other reasons:

- to get across a point that can actually be done as a story far more neatly and quickly than it can be as a factual 'lecturette'
- to pique someone's interest, prompting them to ask a question and thereby continue the conversation about you
- to entertain them.

Don't underestimate the last of these. Often people ask "what do you do?" at networking events because either they think that's the sort of thing you ask at networking events (and it is) or because they are waiting for breakfast or lunch to be served and it's a way of filling in time. They may be people so removed in what they do from what you do that any business related dialogue would be guaranteed to be unproductive, so why not at least reward them for their interest in you with a story. It goes back to being memorable.

## Ten tips for better story telling

Here are some tips to productive story telling as part of your promotional activities.

- (1) Develop at least six different stories, probably illustrating different facets of the services you offer. Develop a short (60-90 seconds) version and a longer one (2-3 minutes).
- (2) Practise your stories at every opportunity. They will not be right first time so be curious as to what goes down well with people and the reasons why they lose interest.
- (3) Continuously refine your stories. Is one of them too short? Is it too long? Have you used jargon? (If so, remove it: explaining it just clogs up the story.)
- (4) Make the story about the problem the client had and what you did to help them resolve it. Explanations of why your intervention worked are less important, if only because, if you tell the story well, the other person is bound to ask you.
- (5) Add specific detail—it was a car manufacturer, it was a hotel, whatever. The detail may be irrelevant to the point of the story, but it is not irrelevant to why you're telling the story (eg, to be remembered).

- (6) Be careful naming names: clients may not like what they thought was confidential being talked about in public, particularly if it is not that favourable to them. This is particularly true of people. I have never had a problem with using aliases and even drawing attention to the fact ("I had a client, let's call him Sam. Sam was this... Sam did that..."). By doing so, it might reassure a possible client that their secrets are safe with you, too.
- (7) Strip out the details which are about you (not the client): eg, don't say things like "it was a long time ago, and I don't really work in that area any more", don't say why or how you got to meet the client, unless it is directly relevant to your point.
- (8) Labour the point about the difficulties the client was having before they met you.
- (9) Be careful about how you stop. The ending is what the other person will remember most. If you want to pique their interest, you have to leave something unsaid in order to prompt a question like, "well, how did you do that, then?" On the other hand, finish too early and they'll feel irritated at being left high and dry. Avoid postscripts. If the other person thinks you've stopped, they won't be listening (or they'll resent having to listen) if you restart, "As a postscript, what happened was X". If X is relevant, weave it into the main story.
- (10) Morals. Many stories have a moral: the lesson you want the other person to learn. Whether you include it has to be a matter of judgment for each story and for each situation. They can come across as statements of the bleedin' obvious, or they can fall into the postscript trap. But they can also be a very neat way of repeating the essence of the story in a few words.

## Why this works

Adults learn best when they are in their feelings. As you don't have a lot of time, you need to exploit this. People usually get into their feelings as a result of an experience and, in the circumstances, telling them a story is a good way of doing this. Of course, going and showing them, introducing them to the client, and so forth would be much better but you don't have the opportunity to do that at a networking event (though you might do later, if you tell them a good enough story).

Stories work because they are not about the person you are talking to. That person can then choose the extent to which they identify with the subject of the story. If you're lucky, you may be describing a problem that the person has (or a person they know has), but you don't know they have it, and they know you don't know. Having revealed that your client solved their problem thanks to you, you obviously are in a far stronger position—because of the response the person you were talking to had.

Even if the problem is an unfamiliar one to the person you're talking to, they can still empathise with the subject of your story and it is the empathy which is the feeling you want them to have, which is why you need to labour the problems the client had in order to get a big contrast between what life was like for the client before they met you, and what it was like afterwards.

Stories on the emotional intelligence at work website:

[www.emotionalintelligenceatwork.com/stories](http://www.emotionalintelligenceatwork.com/stories)

Case studies dressed up as stories: [www.emotionalintelligenceatwork.com/case-studies](http://www.emotionalintelligenceatwork.com/case-studies)