

Stories That Work For Sales



BY GABRIELLE DOLAN

Usually in sales conversations, you spend a lot of time on ‘small talk’ and swapping random personal stories to try to build rapport with your customer or a potential client. Building rapport with someone before you launch into what you really want them to buy not only is good business sense, but also makes scientific sense, especially when it comes to storytelling.

Stories are the fastest, easiest and most natural way to build rapport, and establish trust and credibility with someone. However, the stories you share in a sales context must have purpose and be authentic because random small talk has not been properly thought through. Stories or conversations with no purpose are hit and miss.

You should try to have three types of stories in sales meetings that:

1. show how others have benefited from your product or service
2. demonstrate your values
3. address any potential concerns the client may have.

SHOW PRODUCT BENEFITS

Showing how others have benefited from your product or service is probably the easiest to do. Don't fall into the trap of just listing the benefits, but

rather explain the benefits of what you are offering by sharing stories about what other clients have experienced.

When I meet with new clients, they often want to hear about the work I have done with other clients similar to them. I choose companies I have worked with that are similar in size or industry, as well as those facing similar challenges that I have helped them successfully deal with.

DEMONSTRATE YOUR VALUES

Demonstrating your values or your company's values is not done enough in sales meetings, and it's so important. However, we often tell others what we value in a dry statement: 'We value customer service' or 'I value trust and am trustworthy'. These statements mean nothing.

A client you have worked with previously has had the benefit of time to get to know you and what you value, but you are a complete stranger to any new client you meet. You must demonstrate your values quickly — and one of the most effective ways to do that is through an authentic and appropriate story.

ADDRESS ANY POTENTIAL CONCERNS

Addressing your client's potential concerns is often overlooked or avoided in sales conversations. The



key to this is to try and pre-empt what concerns they may have and listen for cues during the meeting. Then have stories to try and alleviate these concerns. The following are two stories that have been used in real sales situations.

BABY CRIES

Keith Chittleborough has one of the toughest sales jobs in the world: selling a product people need, but don't want. He is an audiologist, hearing aid provider and clinical development consultant for the world's only extended-wear hearing device, the Lyric™.

A particular stigma is attached to wearing hearing aids — unlike glasses, with frames made by companies such as Prada and Armani, hearing aids are not seen as a fashion accessory. New patients often come to Keith with excuses already prepared for why hearing aids are not going to work for them. So, Keith has to not only explain complex technologies, but also get his patient enthusiastic about something they are resisting. This is one of his favourite stories to help with this.

Story

A big, burly 40-year-old bloke comes to see me; his biceps are the size of my thighs. He's nervous, but already excited about the product, having done a bit of his own research. He's found out, because Lyric™ is so deep in the ear canal and the battery lasts for several months, it can be worn even in bed.

Shyly, he tells me he's going to be a dad in a few weeks and he wants to be able to hear his newborn baby cry at night.

He's been wearing Lyric ever since, and his daughter is now nearly three years old.

Outcome

In just a few sentences, Keith's story sums up a particular product feature and how it changed one of his patient's lives.

'Not only is the technology explained, but the emotional connection also demonstrates the value of the technology,' says Keith. He also believes that this story shows patients that hearing aids are not just for the elderly, which helps to break down some of the

stigma attached to using them. All of this is achieved in just a few sentences, highlighting that stories can be just as effective when they are short and sharp.

David and Goliath

Jason Garner is a retailing and property executive. He often finds himself in tricky situations where he has to collect lease payments from retail tenants. Obviously, he wants to keep the tenants as clients, but he also has to find a way to recover the money owing. The tenants may be under financial pressure and often go into meetings with Jason feeling like it's 'David versus Goliath'. This is the story Jason shares in these situations.

Story

My dad was a printer and I remember as a kid I didn't see him a lot because he worked seven days a week, holding down multiple jobs. He worked really hard to build his business and he would often miss key family moments because of this. I recall many birthday dinners when Dad wasn't there. But I am really proud of Dad and the upbringing he gave us because I know he did all of this for us and to keep the family going.

He was actually really instrumental in teaching me the importance of not only hard work but also respect for others. I followed in Dad's shoes and worked in retail for many years, so know firsthand the demands of business — the pressure of sales, the small margins and making sure bills are paid on time — and I know how heavily that can weigh on you and how it affects every part of your life.

I guess the reason I am sharing this with you is because I want you to understand that while I may not fully understand what you are going through, I am here to help you. If I do anything less, my Dad will kill me.

Outcome

Jason says this story always seems to alter the conversation for the better. 'I remember one time when that story changed the mood of the meeting completely,' he says. 'The retailer could see that I was not 'Goliath', but someone he could work with to overcome this issue. After that, the relationship between us became a partnership rather than a transactional one, which ensured mutual success for all.'

Edited extract from Stories for Work: The Essential Guide to Business Storytelling (Wiley \$29.95), now available at all good bookstores. Learn more at www.gabrielledolan.com