

BEST-SELLING AUTHOR OF *STORIES FOR WORK*

**GABRIELLE DOLAN**

**magnetic**  
**STORIES**

CONNECT WITH CUSTOMERS AND

ENGAGE EMPLOYEES WITH

**BRAND STORYTELLING**

FREE  
CHAPTER

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# Introduction

In 2019 I published my fifth book, and my mother-in-law, Jan, asked me a good question. She asked in a genuinely caring way, ‘Don’t you run out of things to write about?’ I thought about this and agreed that it would be a long, long time before I even considered another book. Yet here I am again.

Here’s why.

When I first started my practice on storytelling back in 2005, no-one was talking about storytelling in business. The common reaction I received back then was often along the lines of ‘Oh, all that once-upon-a-time stuff?’ It was dismissed as not being relevant or credible, or just too emotional and ‘touchy feely’.

Fast forward to today, and I never receive this kind of reaction.

**PEOPLE REALISE THE POWER OF SHARING STORIES IN BUSINESS AS A RELEVANT, CREDIBLE AND EFFECTIVE WAY TO CONNECT WITH CUSTOMERS AND ENGAGE EMPLOYEES.**

So after 15 years of writing and speaking about this topic, you’d think I’d feel like my mission was accomplished. The use of stories in business has gained credibility and popularity. Great. More and more organisations are implementing storytelling. Great. No need for another book ... right?

Well, if you go to the ‘Our Story’ page on a vast majority of company websites (maybe even yours), you’ll realise that, actually, there is no story there at all. It’s usually just a bunch of facts, stats and dates, or it’s filled with so much verbiage that does nothing but demonstrate an addiction to corporate jargon. You know, ‘We incorporate leading-edge design with best-practice methodology to deliver customer-centric solutions in a sustainable manner.’

And what about your ‘brand story’—heard of that one? I have clients asking me to help them create their ‘brand story’ all the time. Yet I can recall writing an article on this over a decade ago titled ‘Yeti and the brand story’. (Spoiler alert: neither exist, no matter how hard you try looking.) There is no ONE story that communicates your brand to ALL of your employees and customers.

What is really happening is that the word ‘story’ is being hijacked ... and it’s creating even more confusion for people. I’ve lost count of the amount of times I have read something or listened to someone referring to something as a story and then found myself mumbling, ‘but that is not a story’.

A growing number of businesses are attempting to implement storytelling, but they’re not doing it very well and are missing out on valuable opportunities to connect and engage employees and customers. From entrepreneurs to small- and medium-sized businesses, to large multinational organisations, there are so many mistakes and sadly a lot of misguided efforts going on.

On the flip side, I have also heard some fabulous stories that have not been shared—even though they absolutely should have been.

**THE ONE GOOD THING TO COME OUT OF THE CURRENT CLIMATE IS THE REALISATION THAT HUMAN CONNECTION IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN EVER BEFORE.**

COVID-19, Black Lives Matter and the Australian bushfire crisis are just three examples (from 2020 only!) that show how the world has been challenged and is changing.

Our social media feeds are flooded with tragic news, but also with stories of hope. Stories of individuals trying and making a difference, like UK war veteran Captain Tom Moore who at 99 decided to walk 100 laps of his garden before his 100th birthday to raise money for the UK's National Health Service (NHS). His story created such a connection with people that he went on to become a bit of celebrity, raising over £30 million, and he was knighted by Queen Elizabeth II in July 2020.

Then there are stories of companies who responded to the challenges of the coronavirus in unusual and captivating ways, like gin distilleries such as Four Pillars in Melbourne and Archie Rose in Sydney moving production to make hand sanitiser. When hotels around the world were forced to close, two Marriott Hotels in the French Riviera donated their unused produce and food products to a local children's charity.

These stories have been actively communicated by the companies themselves, and they have created a heady mix of magnetism and attraction. We can't help but be drawn to them. They connect with us. They engage us, like never before.

## **THIS MAGNETIC ATTRACTION IS THE FOUNDATION OF LONG-TERM BRAND LOYALTY.**

As such, there are four trends emerging that you need to be aware of when it comes to brand storytelling.

- **Trend 1:** Customers are increasingly making purchasing decision based on their own values. While this is not new, more socially aware consumers are realising their collective power when it comes to influencing companies to make more ethical choices.
- **Trend 2:** Employees are seeking greater alignment between their own personal values and their employers' values. They are looking to work for companies that have a greater purpose than simply profit.
- **Trend 3:** A super-connected world has resulted in a surge of transparency that people are referring to as 'Glass Box Brands'.

Before social media it was more like a black box ... hard to see into and easy to decorate on the outside. Social media has meant it is very hard to hide an internal culture from the outside world.

- **Trend 4:** The birth of ‘cancel culture’, where people will use social media to call out any company or celebrity that they believe has done something wrong. They will publicly withdraw support and shame them, encouraging others to do the same.

**COMPANIES NEED TO BE AWARE OF THE COMBINED IMPACT THESE FOUR TRENDS HAVE ON THEIR BRAND.**

The internal and external brand have become one, and it is more important than ever to take control of your brand and your stories.

Hence, this book shows leaders of businesses, from individual to multinational organisations, how to navigate these trends by generating and sharing magnetic stories that authentically engage employees, connect with customers and create brand loyalty.

Your customers and employees can be your greatest brand ambassadors and supporters ... or detractors.

So you need to understand how to choose and use the right stories, in the right way.

In this book, you'll learn how to:

- connect with your customers in a more authentic way
- increase the engagement of your employees
- make decisions based on your company's values and purpose
- champion your employees and customers as your greatest advocates
- take control of your brand and reputation for greater success
- understand the importance of good storytelling (what it is and what it isn't)

- implement brand storytelling effectively
- have a stronger presence online by sharing great stories.

We will focus on the five types of stories you need in business (regardless of size) to connect and engage people with your brand. We'll do this by looking at a diverse collection of real examples to inspire and guide you throughout that process. I will also share with you my proven method to implement storytelling to connect customers and engage employees with your brand.

So, as it turns out, no, Jan, I haven't run out of things to write about, because if there's one thing I've learned, it's that everyone loves a good story but not everyone knows how to find and tell a good one—a magnetic story.

So here goes ...



## CASE STORY

# Columbia Restaurant, Florida, USA

Columbia Restaurant is Florida's oldest restaurant, and the largest Spanish restaurant in the world. It was founded in 1905 by a Cuban immigrant, Casimiro Hernandez Sr.

I was first alerted to Columbia's use of stories by my friend Denise Collazo, who dined at the Florida restaurant and noticed they used stories on the menu. (Stories on the menu? That really got my attention!) So, considering the Florida restaurant is a lazy 24-hour-plus flight from my home in Melbourne, I checked out their website instead.

Their stories were indeed all over their menus, as well as scattered throughout the various sections of their website.

Let's start with the stories on the menu, which highlight that stories don't need to be long for you to create a connection with them. Here are a few examples (and apologies in advance if it makes you hungry).

### *Spanish Bean Soup*

*The soup that made the Columbia famous. The original recipe of Casimiro Hernandez, Sr: garbanzo beans simmered with smoked ham, chorizo sausage and potatoes in a delicious broth of chicken and ham.*

*Picadillo 'Criollo'*

*We could always count on enjoying our mother and grandmother Adela Hernandez Gonzmart's delicious picadillo recipe at her home. A family favorite for generations. Finely ground choice lean beef, braised with onions, green peppers, olives, raisins and capers. Served with white rice and ripe platanos.*

*Crab Enchilado*

*A Sunday favorite when we were children. A mildly spicy sauce of fresh lump blue crabmeat, tomatoes, onions, green peppers, garlic, oregano, and white wine. Served over pasta.*

My favourites, however, came from the wines listed on the menu. (Again, apologies in advance if this makes you feel like a drink.)<sup>1</sup>

*AG Rosado 100% Tempranillo Rosé*

*Selected by Richard Gonzmart as a surprise for his daughter, from Rioja, Spain.*

*Rusty Red*

*Rusty is the creation of Richard Gonzmart as a tribute to the unconditional love between a man and his dog. 100% Tempranillo red wine from Rioja, Spain.*

*Enzi Chardonnay*

*Created in memory of 5th-generation family member Andrea Gonzmart's beloved German Shepherd, Enzi, who lost her battle with cancer. Napa Valley, CA.*

And, talking about wine: they have an extensive 224-page wine list that reads more like a storybook than a wine list. They share a short story of each winery they purchase wine from, and another story about the wine maker.

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<sup>1</sup>I was writing this at 9 am and it made me feel like a drink.

## Is your story a Netflix series?

The history page on their website is also written as such an engaging story that it could easily be the script of a movie. Here are just the few opening paragraphs:

*It began in Tampa's Ybor City, (pronounced EE-bore) as a small 60-seat corner café known for its Cuban coffee and authentic Cuban sandwiches, frequented by the local cigar workers.*

*As the Prohibition movement gained steam, Casimiro Sr. faced a bitter dilemma. He could lose his saloon or find a new use for the Columbia. He did not have to look far. Manuel Garcia, who owned La Fonda, the restaurant next door, agreed in 1919 to join him and retain the name 'Columbia.' The size of the Columbia doubled overnight. Also, in 1919, his son, Casimiro Hernandez Jr., joined the business. Following the death of Casimiro Sr. in 1929, Casimiro Jr. took over ownership and operation of the restaurant.*

*Casimiro Jr. aspired to take the Columbia beyond its humble beginnings and envisioned an elegant dining room with music and dancing, the likes of which were unheard of in this part of the country at the time. During the height of the Depression in 1935, he took a chance by building the first air-conditioned dining room in Tampa, complete with an elevated dance floor. He named it the Don Quixote Room.*

*Casimiro Jr. and his wife, Carmen, had one child, Adela Hernandez Gonzmart. Adela was a concert pianist who was trained at the Juilliard School of Music. In 1946, Adela married Cesar Gonzmart, a concert violinist. They traveled throughout the United States while Cesar performed in famous supper clubs during the early 1950s. In 1953, Adela's father, Casimiro Jr., was in failing health, so they returned to Tampa. They divided the business duties of operating the restaurant and raising their two sons, Casey and Richard.*

*The family persevered in keeping the restaurant open during the late 1950s and all through the 1960s when Ybor City was dying. Many of the row houses that once housed the cigar workers had decayed*

*into slums. Urban renewal cut the heart from the Latin Quarter. More families moved out. Businesses closed. Cesar Gonzmart realized they had to do something to bring people back to Ybor City ...*

Your stories can create real suspense and intrigue about your company — cliffhanger endings that makes you want to know more.<sup>2</sup>

## Long-term commitment to collecting

I contacted Marketing and Public Relations Manager Jeff Houck, who has been working with the company since 2015.

I wanted to ask Jeff when the company made the decision to use stories so heavily. I got the feeling it wasn't a couple of years ago, but maybe it was about ten years ago, when storytelling was starting to gain some traction in the business world as a legitimate way to communicate. His answer blew me away.

This decision was made in 1946. They hired a newspaper journalist called Paul Wilder who wrote a newspaper column five times a week, sharing recipes and specials and — most popular — stories, anecdotes, interviews and observations. They were actually paid advertisements, but, as Jeff said, 'Paul told the stories of the characters of the restaurant. It never was told as an advertisement.'

One such story comes from a column written by Paul in 1951:

*A tall ruddy-faced stranger sat down in the Don Quixote court and ordered dinner. He was all by himself. He told the waitress, 'You know I am here tonight because of a dead man. I am a member of the Royal Northeast Mounted Police. I have been in it for 11 years. Eight years ago I was on duty in the Yukon Territory where I found a drowned man. I searched him for identification and among his papers was a card from the Columbia Restaurant in Tampa, Florida, with a picture of a statue and a fountain. For some strange reason, I kept the card ... I thought that*

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<sup>2</sup>Which of course you can at the history page of the Columbia Restaurant's website.

*someday I would visit there.’ As he left he said the picture of the Columbia was fulfilled and that he will be back again in three more years.*

Jeff says the second- and third-generation owners ‘really understood storytelling’ and that today across their five restaurant brands they use stories extensively, stating that ‘almost everything on the menu has a small bit of narrative’ that he knows the customers connect with.

## Showcasing customers

They also feature their customers in their stories. In fact, Jeff said, ‘We do our best work when we share stories of the people that visit Columbia.’

For example, the story they shared on Valentine’s Day in 2020 of a couple that have been coming to the restaurant on their wedding anniversary for 71 years. It read:

*If you had to bestow a title of Sweethearts of the Columbia, Mits and Fannie Zamore of Tampa would be at the top of the lovebirds list.*

*Each January, they celebrate their wedding anniversary at the Columbia in Ybor the same way they have for 71 years in a row: by sitting at the same table in the Patio dining room, No. 370.*

*They’ve kept to their annual tradition of toasting to their love with a strawberry Pink Squirrel cocktail. The couple sat at this table the first year, then got the same table accidentally the next year. Then it became a seven-decade tradition.*

*Columbia salutes the Zamores on their wonderful life together and wishes sweethearts everywhere a Valentine’s Day full of love.*

Jeff told me that they are ‘less interested in sharing stories about the food but rather the stories about their customers. In the process we show them choosing us, and that’s an honour.’

The stories don’t end with the history on the website, the origin of the food and wine on the menus and the loyal customers; they find opportunities to share stories on a variety of topics.

## Heritage stories

On their website they share the stories of the various artworks and stained glass windows that adorn the restaurant.

There is a video on their YouTube channel about their iconic chandelier that was purchased in 1936 for £550 and is now worth US\$250 000 ... and how the 1880 lights in it were painstakingly cleaned in 2018.

The YouTube channel also features other video stories, such as one following the journey of the bread from the 100-year-old bakery that they have been getting their bread from since the start, and the story of current president Richard Gonzmart's favourite table, where he first met his wife. (He never sits at that table with anyone but her.)

They actively look for opportunities to share stories. On 4 July 2019 they wrote on their Facebook page,

*On Fourth of July, we remember the patriotic origins of our name.*

*In 1903, founder Casimiro Hernandez, Sr., named his new Ybor City café the Columbia Saloon out of gratefulness for his asylum in the land of opportunity.*

*The saloon's name was inspired by the song 'Columbia, Gem of the Ocean,' a popular patriotic tune at the time which functioned as an unofficial national anthem in competition with 'Hail, Columbia' and 'The Star-Spangled Banner.'*

*The name Columbia, in fact, served as a nickname for the United States of America in the 19th century.*

## Engaging employees

The second- and third-generation owners' commitment to storytelling has clearly continued to this day. Jeff explained that every person who comes and works in the Columbia Restaurant (about 1000 employees) learns

about the stories as part of their induction. Every week they hold team meetings where another story is shared.

For their hundredth anniversary they produced a coffee table–style book called *The Columbia Book* and Jeff confessed that he read it about four times in his first few months. The stories are the basis of continuing education for all employees. Jeff said the motivation for employees to learn these stories is ‘you don’t want to be the waiter that knows less than your customer’.

They know that their staff being able to explain the story behind the chandelier, or the statue in the fountain, or where the recipe originates from, enhances the customer experience. As Jeff says, it

*goes so far beyond the plate and the table. That, yes, people are spending money on their food, but, more importantly, they are voting with their time. We know that when we share stories it becomes an immersive emotional experience.*

Jeff sees it firsthand: customers come in and repeat these stories for friends that are visiting for the first time. They bring their friends from out of town and ‘they reshare the stories with pride’. He reflected that ‘if your customers love the stories they hear they will share them and become your story evangelists and your brand ambassadors’. This comment from Jeff is the essence of brand loyalty.

You need look no further than the Columbia Restaurant to see the proof that stories connect with customers and engage employees. They have over 1000 employees and, in an industry that is known for its high turnover, 28 per cent of their employees have a tenure longer than ten years.

It’s interesting that all this information on their website is under a tab called ‘The Columbian Experience’, which I think is an appropriate name. Reading these stories I feel like I have experienced the restaurant without having actually been there.

I finished my conversation with Jeff with him telling me that they have kept the legacy of Paul Wilder alive: they know, by keeping records and recording information now, that it’s all about ‘future storytelling’.

When they reopened their restaurants in June 2020 after the coronavirus forced closures, they hung banners from their restaurant that simply read, ‘We’re open again — make some history with us.’

**RECORDING AND SHARING STORIES FROM THE PAST  
AND THE PRESENT WILL HELP COMMUNICATE  
YOUR BRAND IN THE FUTURE.**

**Check and reflect**

- How could you share stories about heirlooms or artefacts in your company that hold special value beyond monetary value, like Columbia Restaurant’s chandelier, fountain or recipes?
- How could you share stories about rituals, like Richard only ever sitting at a particular table with his wife?
- Do your customer-facing employees know stories that can enhance the customer experience?
- Do you actively share stories of your customers?
- Do you actively encourage customers to share their stories and engage with them on social media when they do?
- Can you rewrite the timeline of your company so it’s more like a Netflix series?