



## CRAFT A COMPELLING STORY

With 200 pounds on his five-foot-four-inch frame, Brad Hefta-Gaub was a self-described couch potato who sat around at home and ate lots of junk food. Facing the onset of poor health and disease, he decided it was time to get healthy. He took up running, biking, and swimming, eventually reducing his weight to 140 pounds and cutting his body fat nearly in half, from 36 percent to 19 percent.

Now a marathon runner and Ironman triathlete, the former RealNetworks and Revenue Science executive and his partner Phil Sabin have rolled out an online social network called Sweat365.com. The Web site helps athletes of all levels track their daily routines, find competitive events, and interact with others who share similar workout goals. Americans now spend \$60 billion a year on diet and fitness programs. With one-third of American adults obese and two-thirds overweight, there's clearly a need for long-term fitness solutions that work. Sweat365.com is the first social network to support people in the common goal of becoming more fit.

"Our goal is to motivate and inspire people to change their lives for the better, through the support and encouragement of their peers," says Hefta-Gaub.

Sweat365.com is a business based on a compelling story, one that includes many of the same elements used to shape a great narrative. There's a *protagonist*, Sweat365.com, which is proposing a solution to change people's fitness habits.

There are *antagonists*, competitors in the fitness space. There are *vivid characters* such as Hefta-Gaub, who overcame his own struggle with obesity. There's *conflict*, the struggle of overweight Americans to become more active. And there's *resolution*, success in overcoming the conflict to lead a healthier life.

Like Sweat365.com, every company can tell the larger company story in a way that's compelling and attracts a high level of interest. It's not just about a non-descript company launching a new product or service. It's about vivid, real-life characters who must overcome obstacles to accomplish a goal that addresses an important customer need. Telling the overall story of your company brings your organization, your people, and your products to life. Not only does it mirror the way a good journalist reports a story, it's also a way to capture and hold the attention of the audiences you hope to reach, drawing them further into your story in the same way great novelists persuade their readers to keep turning the page.

"It's important to recognize that reporters are storytellers themselves and that their readers are best able to understand subjects as memorable, human stories as opposed to a list of facts and figures," says Caroline Boren, Alaska Airlines' managing director of corporate and strategic communications. "Anytime you plan to have a conversation with a reporter, it helps to consciously stop and ask yourself, 'What is the story?' and 'What is the most memorable or visual way I can tell it?'"

## THE COMPELLING NATURE OF STORIES

Why does formulating an overarching story lead to greater exposure for your organization? Because a great story is inherently compelling. Stories arouse a listener's emotions, not just their intellect. They draw us into the drama, motivating us to learn about the dynamics of an organization. They are easy to remember. And they have the power to shift perceptions and accelerate change.

Stories have been an important part of our experience for as long as humans have walked the earth. "The use of the story not only to delight but to instruct and lead has long been a part of culture," writes Peter Guber, CEO of Mandalay Entertainment Group, in *Harvard Business Review*. "We can trace it back thousands of years to the days of the shaman around the tribal fire. It was he who recorded the oral history of the tribe, encoding its beliefs, values, and rules in the tales of its great heroes, of its triumphs and tragedies."<sup>1</sup>

Throughout human history, stories have been fundamental to the way we think and make sense of our world. The ability of stories to engage and create meaning has been confirmed through numerous studies and reports. For example, in his book *Literary Mind: The Origins of Thought and Language*, cognitive scientist, linguist, and author Mark Turner argues



that the human mind is essentially literary. "Narrative imagining—story—is the fundamental instrument of thought," he writes. "Rational capacities depend on it. It is our chief means of looking into the future, of predicting, of planning, and of explaining. It is a literary capacity indispensable to human cognition generally."<sup>2</sup>

As they have in the past, stories continue to play a powerful role today, helping us bridge the gap between experience and communication. From early childhood onward, stories are all around us. They help us grasp ideas and shape our view of the world. When we were children, our parents read to us or shared their own stories. In school, we told our own stories during "show and tell" and listened to those of our classmates. As adults, stories continue to help us make sense of complex experiences. We share our stories with friends and family over dinner. We absorb stories through books, movies, plays, and other entertainment. We hear them while standing in the grocery line, watching the nightly news, and working at the office.

As business executives have come to recognize the power of storytelling, it has begun to make its way into organizations as a way to unite employees around a common goal. Says Stephen Denning, author of *The Springboard: How Storytelling Ignites Action in Knowledge-Era Organizations*, "Storytelling gets inside the minds of the individuals who collectively make up the organization and affects how they think, worry, wonder, agonize and dream about themselves and in the process create and re-create their organization. Storytelling enables the individuals in an organization to see themselves and the organization in a different light, and accordingly make decisions and change their behavior in accordance with these new perceptions, insights and identities."<sup>3</sup>

Stories are capable of turning soulless data into powerful drama that spurs people into action. Writes Guber, "Storytelling . . . is one of the world's most powerful tools for achieving astonishing results. For the leader, storytelling is action oriented—a force for turning dreams into goals and then into results."<sup>4</sup>

Henry Luce and Briton Hadden understood the power of storytelling and turned this knowledge into a lasting business success. The 1923 cofounders of *Time* magazine, Luce and Hadden transformed the world of journalism by taking the dry facts that dominated newspapers at the time and transforming them into vivid, persuasive news summaries. Their writing style proved to be so successful that it eventually gave rise to the formats used by several other weekly magazines such as *Newsweek*, *U.S. News & World Report*, and *People* magazines. Storytelling has since become a key component of news stories published by the *Wall Street Journal* and other daily newspapers around the world. Today it's become the central avenue through which journalists write and broadcast the news.

## Gerry Spence on Discovering the Story

Storytelling is fundamental to the way trial lawyer Gerry Spence presents every case he takes on. Recognized nationwide for his powerful courtroom victories, Spence turns the injustices facing his clients into powerful courtroom melodramas that capture the hearts and minds of the jury. "Everything in life is a story. Everything," he writes in his book *Win Your Case*.<sup>10</sup>

Great lawyers are also great storytellers, according to Spence. "If we are to be successful in presenting our case we must not only discover its story, we must become good storytellers as well," he writes. "Every trial, every presentation, every plea for change, every argument for justice is a story."

So how does one become a great storyteller? By putting oneself inside the skin of the clients whose story we are telling, Spence writes. By feeling things the way they felt them and reliving the experience the way they did.

Although Spence is talking about storytelling as it relates to law, the same concepts can be applied to the business world. It's not just about a company that produced a new product. "Nothing happens to heat the blood when we read abstract language," Spence writes. Instead, you need to ask the questions that will bring the story to life. Ask the founder of your company to walk you through his experience in the present tense. What is he doing when the idea for the product first pops into his mind? What triggers the idea? Where is he, and what is he wearing? How does he feel when he first thinks of the idea? Is he excited? Does he feel it's a pipe dream? Whom does he first talk to about it? What is that person's reaction? What happens next?

Asking to be walked through the story enables us to really feel it, and by really feeling it, we can bring it to life to the audiences to which we want to communicate it. "The best way to tell the story is always from the inside out," Spence writes. "It's hard to tell our story until we know it—that is, until we've *felt it*—heard it with our third ear, seen it with the eyes of our client, until we have been gripped by it in deep places, and have finally lived it."

Spence recommends brainstorming with others to clarify the theme of the story and to figure out what questions you need to ask to make the story more vivid and memorable. He also recommends telling the story to friends, colleagues, and significant others to see which parts they personally relate to. Testing the story before communicating it to the media, a potential investor, or other target audiences helps ensure that we are telling it in a way that truly resonates.

"The stories that each of us have experienced, although with differing details, are the same in their substance," Spence writes. "For every story we hear we inhabit part of that story as our own."



## THE KEY ELEMENTS OF A COMPELLING STORY

Telling the story of your company draws your audiences into your business in the same way a novel captivates a reader, creating a powerful way to shift perceptions. “I think that we human beings have always enjoyed great stories,” says Lee Weinstein, principal of Lee Weinstein & Associates and the former director of global corporate communications for Nike. “It’s part of who we are. It’s built into our evolution. How you tell a story and where you tell a story are really important, and I think PR really allows us to do that in a powerful way.”

So how do you go about crafting your company story? First, you need to have a clear idea of the value proposition of your company. “It all starts with the company’s vision and mission,” says Weinstein. “At Nike, our mission is to provide the innovation and inspiration to every athlete in the world. If you think about innovation and inspiration first, then everything that you do in PR should be innovative and inspirational, from the writing to the images to the selection of the campaigns you’re going to really get behind.”

In addition, your overarching story should have all the elements of a great narrative: a protagonist, an antagonist, a lively cast of characters, a setting, a plot, a conflict, and a resolution:

### *The Protagonist*

The protagonist is always your company and the products and services you’re trying to sell. In the case of Sweat365.com, for example, the protagonist is the company itself, along with its goal of drawing people to its social networking site.

### *The Antagonist*

The antagonist is usually your company’s major competitors. The antagonists for Sweat365.com are competitors in the fitness space, such as Active.com or Runner’s World. Other antagonists can include the broader social network sites such as Facebook and MySpace.

### *The Cast of Characters*

Every great narrative should include a vivid cast of characters who bring your company story to life and will probably include your CEO and a small group of company executives. Who are the interesting, charismatic individuals who can best tell the various pieces of your story? For Sweat365.com, Brad Hefta-Gaub is the most compelling character to tell the business side of the story while cofounder and CTO Phil Sabin is the best person to tell the technology piece of the story. The cast of characters for Sweat365.com also includes users of the site whose lives have been changed by the site. Engaging a vivid cast of characters automatically makes your story more compelling by adding the essential element of human interest.

### *The Setting*

The setting is where the dynamics of your industry category come into play. What is the competitive landscape? What pressures are your company facing in the broader marketplace? Do statistics or background information help reinforce your story? For Sweat365.com, the setting is the overall problem of obesity in America, bolstered by the statistics that more than one-third of U.S. adults are considered obese and two-thirds are considered overweight.<sup>5</sup> It’s also the competitive landscape and the fact that while social networks are taking off, few to date have been created that target audiences with the same specific interest.

### *The Plot*

In fiction, the plot is the action of the story or a series of incidents that take place over time. With your company story, it’s the series of milestones your company is hoping to reach. Writes Guber, “Listeners must remain curious and in suspense—wondering what’s going to happen to them next—while trusting that it is safe to give themselves over to the journey and that the destination will be worthwhile.”<sup>6</sup>

You can foreshadow the plot by telling journalists the milestones you expect to reach over a specific time period and then release each significant milestone as a separate announcement as the plot unfolds. When Sweat365.com was launched, for example, executives let the media know they would hear back from the company when it secured additional funding. By doing that, they were teeing up the next story and foreshadowing the action to come.

### *The Conflict*

The conflict is a series of challenges you need to overcome, a consumer mindset you need to change, or a competitor you need to beat out for your company to be successful. In his book, *News Reporting and Writing*, Columbia University Professor Emeritus Melvin Mencher writes, “Strife, antagonism, and confrontation have been the building blocks of stories since people drew pictures of the hunt on the walls of their caves. Man’s struggles with himself and his gods, a Hamlet or a Prometheus, are the essentials of drama.”<sup>7</sup>

For Sweat365.com, the conflict is overcoming the lack of motivation that prevents Americans from living a healthy lifestyle. On a more personal level, it’s the struggle with oneself to stay in shape. The more clearly you can describe the obstacles your company needs to overcome to attain success, the more compelling your story will be.

### *Resolution*

The resolution is the story’s ending. Did your company reach its goals? Did it accomplish the milestones it set out to achieve? For Sweat365.com, success means



becoming a well-known social networking site that plays a central role in overcoming obesity. It also means truly helping people get in shape. While in reality, the plot continues to unfold as long as your company is in business, you can view the resolution as what happens over a specific time frame, such as what your company accomplished by year end or during the period covered by the PR plan.

## Anne Lamott and the Importance of Drama

*Whether or not we admit it, we're all drawn to drama. Whether it's a great novel, a news article, or hearsay about someone we know, drama is at the heart of any great story. It's what holds people's attention.*

In her book *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life*, Anne Lamott says the basic formula for drama is *setup*, *buildup*, and *payoff*—just as in a joke: “The setup tells us what the game is. The buildup is where you put in all the moves, the forward motion, where you get all the meat off the turkey. The payoff answers the question, Why are we here anyway? What is it that you’ve been trying to give?”<sup>11</sup>

While crafting your pitch, pay close attention to where the drama lies and bring it to the forefront for your audience. What is the *setup*? What does the competitive landscape look like? What challenges does your industry face? What problems do your customers experience? This will set the stage for your announcement.

Second, what is the *buildup*? What obstacles did your staff overcome to develop a new product or service? What other obstacles did your organization encounter to get to this point? Telling a great story always involves forward movement.

Finally, what is the *payoff*? Are you releasing a breakthrough product that will change the industry? Are you solving a difficult problem for customers? In what way are you changing people’s lives? Your story must discuss the significance of your announcement and how it will change the situation you discussed in the setup.

Pulling out the drama captures people’s interest and makes your story far more memorable. As Anne Lamott writes, “Drama must move forward and upward, or the seats on which the audience is sitting will become very hard and uncomfortable . . . There must be movement.”

## APPLYING THE OTHER RULES OF NARRATIVE

In addition to the key elements described above, other rules apply when developing a great narrative, many of which also hold true as you craft your company story:

### Show, Don't Tell

It’s often said that when writing a play or novel, you should show, don’t tell. If you’re describing a character, for example, it has less impact to tell readers, “She felt sad,” than to show readers what you observe: “Tears came to her eyes, and her voice quivered.” In the same way, you don’t want to simply make the claim that your company “successfully” launched its new product. Instead you need to show journalists that your launch was successful by backing up the claim with specific details: the fact that 3,000 consumers attended the launch, for example and that your company sold 1,000 widgets during the first week, greatly exceeding expectations.

### Be Selective

The art of omission is key to producing a great work of art, whether it be a novel, a piece of music, or a painting. Similarly, your company’s story should always be simple and succinct. Don’t get bogged down in relaying every detail about your company, your product, or a particular event. What is the one thing you want your audiences to remember? What are the three most compelling facts that back up the point you’re making? Select only the essential information, and leave the rest out.

### Make It Interesting

For a novel to be compelling, the story must be unique, unusual, or unexpected. In the same way, your overarching story and each individual announcement should be interesting and newsworthy. Mencher, the Columbia University professor, attributes the newsworthiness of an idea or event to one or more of the following seven factors:

- Impact: events that are likely to affect many people
- Timeliness: events that are immediate, recent
- Prominence: events involving well-known people or institutions
- Proximity: events in the circulation or broadcast area (of the media outlet running the story)
- Conflict: events that reflect clashes between people or institutions
- The bizarre: events that deviate sharply from the expected experiences of everyday life
- Currency: events and situations that are being talked about

What makes your story unique, and why should journalists care? You can use these seven factors to test whether your story will be of interest to the media outlets you target.



### *Use Analogies*

Analogies provide a great way to tell a story in a memorable way. Over the years, authors have written successful business books drawing upon colorful analogies in the worlds of war, sports, martial arts, fishing, science, and theater, among other topics. For example, in their book *Judo Strategy*, coauthors David B. Yoffie and Mary Kwak examine the strategic mindset of judo masters, turning this thinking into lessons for business executives. “Metaphors can be great motivational tools because they are usually easy to understand and hard to forget,” Yoffie writes.<sup>8</sup>

### *Leverage Classic Story Themes*

Another way to tell a compelling story is to frame yours using myths and other classical story themes such as those of Pegasus, Midas, Ulysses, Hamlet, King Lear, Creon and his fatal flaw of hubris, the philosopher’s stone, or the hare and the tortoise. Classic stories like these provide a conceptual framework you can use to tell your story with greater impact. Gerry Spence, the criminal defense lawyer, knows this. For him, it’s not a case of Karen Silkwood versus Kerr-McGee. It’s David versus Goliath. Kerr-McGee is “the men in grey suits,” and “the little guy” is Karen Silkwood. Spence frames every case around a conceptual structure that allows jurors to view the situation in the way he intends. And with that, he’s able to defeat billion-dollar multinational corporations such as Kerr-McGee.

“Classical themes continue to pervade all forms of media, including news reporting,” says Caroline Boren of Alaska Airlines. “Capitalizing on the human appeal of these oft-repeated themes is another method for helping the reporter write a compelling story and maximizing your PR opportunities.”

## **BENEFITS OF A COMPELLING STORY**

Crafting an overall company story serves many critical purposes. First, it enables your company to make sure every individual news announcement ties into the broader story you want to tell. Second, it provides a framework for deciding which stories to pursue. It also enables you to tell your story with greater conviction, create a compelling pitch, and tailor it to fit the specific audiences you seek to reach.

### *Describing the Forest, Not Just the Trees*

Companies tend to focus on isolated news announcements without understanding that each individual announcement accrues to the larger company story they want to tell. If an individual announcement doesn’t feed into the larger story, you run the risk of confusing your audiences. They may

think you’re telling a story other than the one you intend. Or they may perceive your news as random or insignificant.

Conversely, when each announcement contributes to your overall company story, your PR efforts become focused and meaningful. In the same way that a novel’s subplot must relate to the overall plot, each announcement your company makes will have the biggest impact if it closely relates to the overarching story. We often remind our clients to explain the forest, not just the tree. If you’re simply focused on each individual announcement, you’re only telling the journalist about the tree. If you want journalists to understand the significance of your news, you must also explain the ways that each tree fits into the larger picture of the forest as a whole.

For example, if Sweat365.com simply issues a press release announcing it received \$900,000 from two venture capitalists, the reaction from a journalist might be, “Why should I care?” But if Sweat365.com ties this announcement back to its overarching story—that the company wants consumers to embrace a social networking platform that helps them become fit—suddenly the news becomes more exciting. A better way to frame the story is to say that venture capitalists see great promise in the Sweat365.com business model. The evidence? The willingness of two venture capitalists to contribute \$900,000 in the first round of funding.

### *Providing a Focused Framework*

Not only does linking each news announcement back to the overarching story enable you to attract the widest exposure for each announcement, it also helps you decide which news announcements should be pursued and which should be discarded as tangential or irrelevant. For example, many of our clients are requested by partners to issue joint press releases. Having an overarching story helps them determine whether each of these opportunities ties back to the story they wish to tell. Knowing this, they can more easily decide if they should invest the resources to promote the announcement to the media, let their partner carry the weight, or refrain from participating in the announcement altogether.

### *Telling Your Story with Conviction*

Tying each announcement to the broader story of your company imbues the news with greater meaning. It’s simply more memorable, which makes it more likely people will pass it on to others. It also makes it easier to get behind the story and pitch it with greater conviction. For example, tying news announcements about Sweat365.com back to the larger story allowed executives to get really passionate about their story pitches. The announcement wasn’t just about another venture capitalist investing in the company. It was about obtaining the funding that was critical to help adults in our society lose weight,

a cause people are passionate about. Knowing your overarching story makes it clear why you're pitching an announcement. And if you're able to participate emotionally, that passion will be contagious.

### *Tailoring Your Story to Your Target Audience*

While an overarching story is important, by itself it's not enough. For your story to be compelling, it must be relevant to the audience you're targeting. A middle-aged woman is not likely to pick up a novel aimed at teenage boys. Nor is she likely to read an article about men's razor blades. Writes Peter Guber, "The great storyteller takes time to understand what his listeners know about, care about, and want to hear. Then he crafts the essential elements of the story so that they elegantly resonate with those needs, starting where the listeners are and bringing them along on a satisfying emotional journey."<sup>9</sup>

In the same way, you need to find a compelling news hook that matches the interests of each media outlet you're targeting. When Hefta-Gaub tells the story of Sweat365.com, the angle he emphasizes entirely depends on the audience he's trying to reach. "During our launch, we worked entirely with business press, so I talked about the business aspects of our strategy—the fact that fitness is a growing market and that we were taking an entirely unique approach," he says. "If I was talking to a lifestyle reporter, I might tell the story from more of a human interest perspective, perhaps about the thirty-year-old woman from Virginia who didn't think she could even run a mile and ended up running a half-marathon because she wanted to blog about how she finished the whole thing without stopping." (Please see Principle 3 for more information about targeting your audiences.)

Note that each of the stories Hefta-Gaub tells relates closely back to the overarching story of the company. It simply does so in a way that matches the interests of the media outlet he wants to reach.

Once you've crafted your overarching story and developed a series of targeted pitches that match the interests of the media outlet you want to reach, you've completed the first step of developing a great relationship with the media by making sure every story pitch is relevant and compelling. In Principle 7, we'll set you on the path to successful story placement by discussing the key steps required to forge lasting relationships with the media.