Storytelling

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Introduction

The starting point for presenting an idea is the story. It is obvious to say that if we do not inform those around us about what we would like to do, although a concept has been arranged in the head, and sometimes refined to the last detail, it does not exist objectively. That is why it is so important to prepare your story well. We use it intuitively, and although it may seem that some have a gift for telling stories and others do not, in practice, as with any skill, we should work in order to improve the quality of our stories. In the area of business, the process of preparing a story about your own activities, products or services is called storytelling. You can prepare yourself to create good stories for your business needs. The following document contains tips that will allow you to build your own narrative step by step. The following example illustrates how important skilful storytelling can be:

"Grzegorz Kosson, a strategist and writer who runs Brands & People, the first storymarketing agency in Poland and storytelling workshops teaching the ability to build and use stories, begins with a story taken from the book "Gulag" by Anne Applebaum. The author describes, among others, survival strategies of Gulag prisoners. One of them consisted in telling exciting stories to fellow prisoners and captors.

In a world deprived of books and films, these stories were worth their weight in gold. Everyone was waiting impatiently for the next part of the story. That is why they protected the life and health of those who were endowed with a talent for narrative. "This picture shows how much strength stories have. From a biological point of view, the story does not have any function. And yet, sometimes it can decide on survival" - notes Grzegorz Kosson, the author of the first Polish book on storytelling "Pass it on, or how to create a thrilling story for a brand", an expert on marketing communication and value management"[[1]](#footnote-2).

1. Getting out of hiding

Dr Monika Górska in her article "The 3 most important rules of storytelling" writes:

"World War II ended in 2005. At least for two Japanese soldiers, who were found in the Philippines in 2005. Yoshio Yamakawa and Tsuzuki Nakauchi, soldiers of the Imperial Army, could not re-join their unit after one of their offensives. Fearing the accusation of desertion, for which they were threatened with death, they lived in hiding for 60 years, in the belief that the war was still going on. Well, we, when communicating with customers or colleagues, sometimes behave like these soldiers, hiding in the belief that the war is still going on. What war? For conviction, for the market, for who is better, price war, words of war and arguments. Many people live in the belief that there is a war going on and you have to fight your corner hard. And I want to propose to you today ... Ending the war.

I suggest you move to a new, higher level of communication with customers and colleagues. But you have to get out of hiding. Do you know what word was most often repeated during the international Content Marketing conference in Arizona last October? Regardless of whether the speaker was Jeff Walker, Dean Graziosi or Brandon Burchard - this was the most common word: Storytelling. And immediately after it: authenticity"[[2]](#footnote-3).

It's hard not to agree that it is the decision to create a story and disseminate the results that actually causes the existence of an idea, company, brand, or product. The more so because storytelling is an increasingly common tool that allows the establishing of a real relationship between the sender and the recipient.

Figure 1. Why the story?

Source: study based on, Dorota Tuszkowska, "Storytelling in content marketing – the captivating power of the narrative"[[3]](#footnote-4)

1. Triggering emotions

To illustrate well what storytelling is in practice, it's best to use examples. Below are references to two short films whose leitmotif is to spread good.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bL9KEaike8U>

Material description: A small boy was caught stealing. The chemist is yelling at him and creating a fuss in the middle of the street. One of the witnesses of the event is the owner of a catering point. He approaches the boy and asks if these stolen medicines are for his mother. The boy nods, crying. The seller pays for the medicines and gives the boy vegan soup for his mother. The boy takes the package and runs home crying all the time. Thirty years later, the same seller, much older, weakens at work and goes to hospital. His daughter receives a list of medical expenses that mean she must sell her father's property. The point is closed and a sign with the word "for sale" appears on its door. One day, the owner's daughter, wakes up at his bed in the hospital and notices a card near his hand. There is a bill for the treatment on the sheet, the amount "0" is shown in the summary. Under the amount, the doctor wrote: "All costs were paid 30 years ago, three painkiller tablets and a portion of vegan soup". It turns out that the attending physician is the very boy whom the seller helped all those years ago.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YBmaXMQI60E>

Material description: An elderly lady is with her grandchildren in a store. You can see that they are shopping carefully looking for products at the lowest price. The girl picks up some products, as if she wanted to buy them, and then sadly puts them back on the shelf. At one point, the old lady tells her to find a birthday present for her grandfather. The girl goes to the fridge with cakes, from which a young man takes out the last cake. As he realizes that the girl would like this last cake he sadly gives it to her. At the checkout, it turns out that the family cannot afford their shopping and have to give up the cake. The girl is very sorry, she does not understand why she must leave the cake despite her grandfather's birthday. The depressed family leaves the cash register. The young man, who witnessed the event, approaches the checkout. He buys the cake put aside by the cashier; it looks like he is happy that he will have it. After a while he catches up with the family and gives the girl the cake. At first the old lady is ashamed and refuses to accept the gift for her granddaughter; however, the man insists. He tells the story of how when he was a child he could not have a cake because of poverty. Then a man bought one for him. He remembered him simply as a man in the queue and because he could not repay him, he is doing so now by giving to someone else. The elderly lady asks the man to leave his contact details. He smiles mysteriously, appears to write his number and hands it to the girl, asking her, if she is able one day, to give to someone in need. When asked about his name, he replies that he is a "man from the queue". The family returns home and the granddaughter with a smile hands the cake to her grandfather. They tell him what happened to them and hand him the card that was supposed to have the man’s number on it. On the card instead of the number is written "simple acts of goodness create an endless spiral." This is exactly the same sentence as the grandfather had once written on a card, while giving a cake to a little boy in a cake shop.

It is worth considering what makes these materials become popular around the world in a short time, gaining hundreds of thousands of views. It is not difficult to notice that the key here is the arousing of strong **emotions** in the viewer. Thanks to the story, it is possible for the audience to identify with the characters and establish relationships. Stories affect emotions and stimulate action. Of course, the issue of emotions is just one of many interpretative keys.

Researchers argue that a good narrative goes to the recipient at the neurological level:

"A captivating movie, a thrilling book that we absorb in one night, friends’ stories from holiday journeys. Why do we like to listen to someone else's adventures? The answer is our social nature and biology. When someone is sympathetic and kind to us, oxytocin is released into our body. It is thanks to this that we are able to feel empathy towards that person, trust her and cooperate with her. Interestingly, oxytocin appears not only in contact with another person, but also when listening to a story. The result is that we begin to feel the emotions of the characters of the story we are listening to. We feel as if we were experiencing the adventure with them. That's why we are moved by reading "The Thief of Books", a screening of "The Fast and the Furious" encourages us to sit behind the wheel of a car, and after "Dirty Dancing" we want to sign up for a dance course. But this is not everything! Research by American cognitive scientist Uri Hasson shows that the brains of the person telling the story and his listener are synchronized! At specific moments, the same areas of the brain are activated in them. The degree of synchronization depends on how well the story is told[[4]](#footnote-5).

Figure 2. How stories influence the recipient's brain



Source: https://culturaldetective.files.wordpress.com/2015/01/brainonstorytelling-onespot.png [[5]](#footnote-6)

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| Exercise (15 min.)   * What would you like to tell a story about, above all? *Oral* * What emotions will your story evoke in the recipients? *Oral* * What stories about your activity most affect your interlocutors? Why? *Oral* |

1. Building a narrative

Good stories are characterized by certain constants. The greatest works of literature or film have so-called turning points at specific points, where, for example, the hero changes or there is a breakthrough in the action, or a solution is found. These turning points usually appear in specific parts of the work. The beginning of the work is a representation of a character or situation, later we observe the struggles of the main character, crowned with a turning point, followed by a solution.

Figure 3. The canonical parts of a story

Source: own work

The method of composition can be traced on the basis of an Allegro advertisement:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tU5Rnd-HM6A>

Material description: An elderly gentleman orders a package of English language materials online. From that moment, learning accompanies him in various life situations: on the appliances in the house there are self-adhesive sticky notes with English names, the man listens on headphones and repeats various formulas in a variety of situations, such as on the bus and in the park, the man practices in front of the mirror, and often speaks English aloud even to the rubber duck in the bath. You can see that he is very motivated. Then the man buys something else over the Internet. The courier brings him a package with an airplane suitcase. The man packs while saying the English names of the items he has in his suitcase. While travelling to England, he repeats the phrases he has learned, including "Hi, I am ...". Finally, he reaches his son's home in England. He is welcomed by his son and his partner. After a while a little boy comes out of his room shyly. Clearly overcome, he says to him, "Hi, I'm your grandpa."

At the beginning, we become acquainted with the main character. Due to the characteristic appearance and, above all, the age of the main character, we automatically get to know him based on him fitting the stereotype and we become sympathetic toward him. We also see that he faces a task which is time-consuming and difficult for him. At the end, thanks to the turning point, we find out about his motivation and at the same time experience strong emotions, we also appreciate the Allegro brand that helped the main character.

In the 22 principles of creating a fairy tale according to Pixar, the fourth principle is a table of contents of an exemplary fairy tale.

Figure 4. The fourth principle of creating a fairy tale according to Emma Coats from Pixar

Source: based on Monika Filipkowska, "Tell me a story - about website storytelling"[[6]](#footnote-7),

The above principle fits with the canonical elements of a good story and can be successfully used to design your own stories. Based on this principle, you can easily start creating your story.

A slightly different approach is presented by Paweł Tkaczyk in his article "Schemes in storytelling - escape from boring advertisements". He cites the conclusions from the book "Culture and communication" by Edmund Leach and Algirdas Greimas who (...) studied the structure of folk tales. The result of their work is the structure of the fairy tale: six elements, some of which are balanced on the principle of oppositions.

Figure 5. Story structure based on "Culture and communication"

Source: elaboration based on, Paweł Tkaczyk, "Schemes in storytelling - escape from boring advertisements"*[[7]](#footnote-8)*

Paweł Takczyk, however, proposes trying different interpretations of this scheme, in order to produce a rather less standard approach. The effect of this approach can be assignment to elements selected in the scheme:

* Product and customer as helpers, the hero is someone important to the customer. For example, passing on in the family or local community the tradition of folk performances, playing an instrument, dancing or recipes for traditional dishes.
* Customer/workshop participant as hero, the creator (e.g. potter) is the helper, the product is the obstacle. The potter helps the customer make a beautiful dish. Unfortunately, the hero cannot make it. In the end, both can see that what had seemed likely to be unsuccessful was really unique and valuable[[8]](#footnote-9).

Regardless of the approach, the main issues; that is, presenting the characters, showing what they are struggling with, the turning point, i.e. overcoming the difficulties and, consequently, presenting the solution, are the key elements around which a proper narrative should be built. Of course, video materials, due to their attractiveness to the viewer, are the most desirable form, but at the same time they are relatively the most difficult to create. However, regardless of whether the material we want to tell is in writing, audio or video form, the starting point is the story itself. When thinking about what is to be conveyed, the starting point is the everyday issues related to the creative process. Regardless of the medium, the starting point is the presentation of the character.

An interesting solution was used in material promoting the Year of Cultural Heritage. It consists of several short frames showing what cultural heritage is. With the help of casual comments in the form of pop-up texts, each sequence is a separate closed form with a turning point. This material shows that creating an interesting composition does not have to be tedious. Sometimes an idea and some fun points are enough. The film is designed to arouse curiosity and it does so through understatement.

<https://europa.eu/cultural-heritage/about_en>

Material description: The film presents short snippets referring to contemporary dance, embroidering traditional ornaments on clothes, preparing traditional dishes, listening to music, making wine in a traditional way, folk dance, communing with material culture, and ends with the question "And what will you discover in this year?"

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| Exercise (20 min.)   * Based on the fourth principle of creating fairy tales by Pixar or a scheme of character description, create a short story about your creative work. *Written* * How many stories are you able to prepare? About what? *Written* |

1. Presentation of characters

In the case of the creators of culture, the creator himself is a natural candidate for the main character of the story, it can also be an institution, you can lead a narrative from the point of view of the recipient, or it can be a situation. However, it's best to start with the creator. At first it may seem difficult, especially inventing a topic poses the biggest problem. It is worth bearing in mind that stories can be told about everything, and everyday life is a good starting point. An example of a story about everyday life is one presented in the article by Dr Monika Górska: *If storytelling is the answer, what is the question? Three stories that will help you increase your sales*:

"It was a few years ago. Jacek was then the director of the special kindergarten "Orzeszek". To raise money for his charges, he sent hundreds of letters monthly to companies whose addresses he found in the Business Panorama. Inside the envelope there was a request for help and a lot of information: how much money they need, what they will use it for, what equipment they will buy. Only facts. Zero emotions. In general, he received an answer to one out of a hundred of these letters. A refusal. Sometimes he didn’t even receive any. He no longer had strength. After training in storytelling, Jacek decided that he would change something in his communication. He started inserting a card in each envelope on which one day in the life of the headmaster of the kindergarten was described. The text on the card told his story of how difficult it was to be patient. Not when sick children are fed and they spit everything out. And not when you need to change nappies. That was easy. It was difficult for him to be patient when he was not sure each day whether he would be able to guarantee to continue taking care of these children and whether he would have enough money to keep this kindergarten going. This story was not perfect at all. There were a few mistakes and one swear word in it. But reading it, it felt that it was authentic and true. Jacek showed what he really thinks and feels. And what is important to him. Do you know what happened next? First, as usual - silence. No answer came ... But after a week, an e-mail appeared in Jacek's mailbox. "We read your letter and my wife and I want to transfer 10,000 zlotys to your account"[[9]](#footnote-10).

It turns out that in order for a story to take effect, no expenditures are required to create video materials. It is enough to change the perception of your actions and try to interweave them in the narrative. We should continue to keep in mind that when presenting a character, we do not present dry facts, as in a resume, we only locate them in a certain process, difficulties, challenges, successes and failures. We describe the character more through what he is struggling with than what he is.

A very good example of a character's presentation can be found in material referring to the promulgation of cultural heritage through the preservation and promotion of traditional recipes. The film is also associated with fundraising through the kickstarter.com platform

<https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/531542262/grandmas-project-sharing-the-worlds-most-delicious>

Material description: The film begins with the presentation of a character. This is done by an old lady and the young creator of a project talking directly to the camera. Later there is a sequence showing an elderly lady who is working in the kitchen, interspersed with statements directly to the camera about the concept and character of the project. One of grandmothers reads a description of the project in English and she clearly finds this difficult, which is an interesting situation. Then there is a compilation of films showing how different grandmothers cook dishes. Next, a visualization is shown of the operating principles of the website on which materials will be collected and the fact that funds are needed to create such a platform.

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| Exercise (25 min.)   * Explain what made you do what you do. *Oral* * Explain which way you went in order to do what you do. *Oral* * Describe your greatest achievement. *Oral* * Write a list of actions that you could turn into a story. *Written* |

1. Difficulties, struggles, turning point

The key to building an interesting narrative is the description of a struggle and hardship with which the main character copes, as in the previous example of the director of the kindergarten, where the description contained everyday challenges and fears that he must deal with. In practically every interesting story there is a smaller or bigger problem that builds tension. *Without obstacles, without failures, without conflicts there is no good story. And basically there is no story at all - it's just a description, a manifestation, a presentation[[10]](#footnote-11).* Regardless of who the hero of the story is, you can always show his struggles, as in the materials referring to a project of restoring monuments with traditional construction methods:

<https://europa.eu/cultural-heritage/ref-media-video/erasmus-vet-project-cultural-heritage_en>

Material description: The film can be seen in a German-Hungarian project. A group of young people are renovating old buildings in Transylvania. The frames showing their work are interspersed with the participants' statements about how this action affects and transforms their lives.

or from the wide world of sports presented below:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=6&v=uGJGQQVNqjg>

Material description: The film shows how a few moms are taking care of their children, teaching them to take their first steps, including those on skates and skis. You can see how they get up with their kids in the morning and then take them to classes. Another interwoven shot shows how the mothers accompany their children in sports activities and tournaments. You can see how they help them, how they observe and experience their failures and daily hardships. The children in subsequent interwoven shots are getting older and perform more and more difficult moves in winter sports. The level of competition is getting more and more serious. The ending presents Olympic successes and it shows how the mothers are still experiencing and enjoying the successes of their children, who are now adult athletes.

In the case of the second material, the question arises of whether to talk about failures. The opinions of experts in this respect are divided, but more often they are willing to admit that difficulties and failures give authenticity to stories:

"But I convince them that there is nothing stronger than a leader who admits defeat and shows that not everything in his life is so rosy. Then the listeners will be more inclined to listen to him and follow him. Sometimes they become convinced and then their performance is real dynamite! The story is a powerful tool of influence - and that's why I work with my clients only on their authentic values and stories taken from life "[[11]](#footnote-12).

Showing defeats is certainly a kind of magnet, but we should be careful not to leave a negative impression on the recipient. Most important is the turning point and how the hero copes with the difficulties, and not exaggerating the difficulties. Because only the way of overcoming them allows you to generate and promote an authentic message, which is the main goal of the story.

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| Exercise (35min.)   * Create a list of your everyday challenges in creative work. *Written* * Arrange them in a chronological or non-chronological order that builds up tension. *Written* * Describe how you handled the problem. *Written* * Based on the prepared description using available equipment (e.g. a telephone handset), film what you do creatively. Before you start filming, think about what you want to show, set up a path, think about how long the material will last, where you start and what you'll finish on. *Film task* |

1. The message

It should not be forgotten that in the story we are telling, the effect we want to achieve is important. Building a narrative is not an end in itself. In the case of the creators of culture, the goal may be to raise funds for the implementation of tasks, increase the number of orders to perform, generally speaking to achieve business goals. The story has the task of establishing a relationship with the recipient (e.g. an investor) and exciting emotions that motivate him to support our actions, whether by becoming a customer, sponsor or advocate for our idea.

"Do not forget about the message - that is, what you are telling about. In STORYTELLING you do not tell it to be nice, or to show yourself. You tell because you have important content to "sell". Maybe it's a concept or a lifestyle of which you want to convince others. Maybe it is one of the most important "character traits" of your or your brand. Or it may be something in your service, which makes your customers happier. What is unique in you, or in what you want to convince others of? What makes their life easier or makes it take on more sense? What would people and the world lose if it were suddenly not to be here tomorrow? If from all of your story one, and only one, sentence were to be remembered, what would it be? If your story lacks a message, it's as if an engine were not installed in your dazzling Bugatti or Ferrari. It will evoke admiration, surprise and even jealousy, but ... it will not take you anywhere"[[12]](#footnote-13).

The message may be, for example, the preservation against being forgotten as discussed earlier and the simultaneous dissemination of unique recipes and the human history behind them. The message may also be to show the value of spreading the results of activities in discovering cultures by digitizing and sharing the results of archaeological work.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=167&v=XkjOD1WJ9Fo>

Material description: The film shows shots of archaeologists working together with their statements about the work being done. In the shots you can see how archaeologists use tablets or smartphones to share the results of their work. Inscriptions are posted on the frames informing about the ideas and benefits for archaeologists of using the platform.

The main value may be spreading the idea of doing something amazing, such as a rock concert with the participation of 1000 musicians on one stage.

<https://vimeo.com/217468912>

Material description: The film shows preparations for a rock concert with the participation of 1000 musicians. At the beginning, shots are shown presenting the preparation, developing the stage, setting up dozens of drums and microphones. Then, shots are presented of the audience being entertained and musicians during the concert. Throughout the film, subtitles are inscribed on the frames, showing how the idea of the concert was born, how the crowdfunding platform was used, what amount was collected and what factors determined the final success of the project.

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| Exercise (30 min.)   * Based on the text from the previous exercise, rate what message it has. Is the message that comes from the story what you want to convey? *Oral* * Show your story to relatives, ask them to rate it and indicate what they like the most. Talk to them about how you can spice up your story. Make corrections to your story. *Written* * Based on the corrections made, record film material from your creative work. Just like before you start filming, think about what you want to show, prepare yourself a path. Think about how long the material will last, where do you start from and what you will finish on, whether you will ask questions to colleagues, someone will speak, or you will comment on what you are filming. *Remote* |

1. Types of storytelling

One of the most interesting examples of the presentation of types of storytelling is the one shown in the article: "Storytelling - 6 types of stories that will captivate your audience":

Figure 6. Types of story according to "Storytelling - 6 types of stories that will captivate your audience"

Source: Based on, "Storytelling - 6 types of stories that will captivate your audience"[[13]](#footnote-14)

In turn, analysing the types of story, Dr. Monika Górecka distinguishes three strategic stories:

Figure 7. Types of story according to Dr Monika Górska

Source: Based on Dr. Monika Górska, "If storytelling is the answer, what is the question? Three stories that will help you increase your sales"[[14]](#footnote-15).

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| Exercise (10 min.)   * Think about what type of story you described in the previous task. Does its content match the above types? What should be done to fit it in? Should it be changed if it matches several types? Can you tell a few stories? *Oral* |

1. Good practices

Building a story is a creative process. And as in any such process it is important to know the framework of action and certain principles. This does not mean, however, that each story should be built based on the same hard guidelines. Tips and advice are designed to help you create and critically look at your own story. It must be remembered, however, that they should be approached with a certain degree of criticism.

Figure 8. Tips for preparing and presenting stories

Source: Based on "Storytelling: 20 tips on how to build a good story"[[15]](#footnote-16)

Figure 9. Tips for preparing and presenting stories, cont.

Source: Based on "Storytelling: 20 tips on how to build a good story"[[16]](#footnote-17)

Figure 10. What not to do when building a story

Source: Based on "Storytelling: 20 tips on how to build a good story"[[17]](#footnote-18)

When creating and assessing a story it is also worth referring to the 22 rules of creating fairy tales according to Pixar:

Figure 11. 22 rules for creating fairy tales by Emma Coats from Pixar.

Source: based on Monika Filipkowska, "Tell me a story - about website storytelling"[[18]](#footnote-19)

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