

Telling the Chambre

Looking for a way to transform dry numbers or abstract concepts into a compelling vision of goals and objectives? The age-old practice of storytelling is one of the most effective tools leaders can use. And it's hitting the chamber world.

by Cathy Lada

We all like to tell stories, right? Stories about families, friends, good memories, even stories about hardship, lessons learned and tough times, bested or otherwise. The lure of the story is its universal appeal, its ability to communicate beyond its storyline or major details, to reveal a depth not possible in traditional explanations.

But, have you ever considered for a moment the power of the story in the board room, or with the prospective member, the media or the professional world in general? With so much time spent on PowerPoint slides or reams of data or products and services, couldn't a story reveal all that the listener needs to know? In reality, when it's time to really hammer your point across, what works better than a timely, well-told anecdote? One that crystallizes your views eloquently and gives the listener a resonating message in the context of a simple narrative?

Pumping iron

Consider for a moment, this story (about a story) from **Harvey Schmitt, CCE, President & CEO of the Greater Raleigh (NC) Chamber of Commerce**, when faced with a prospective new member sale:

"One day I had a meeting with the new president of one of my largest members. While new to his position, he was a veteran community volunteer. Our conversation started well, with exchanged family information and his enthusiasm for his new assignment. Then we got to reviewing the activities of the chamber and his company's participation. As we talked, he kept pushing me about what would be 'in it for his company.' I soon learned that he had an experience with another chamber earlier in his career that had soured him on the value of chamber membership. It also became increasingly clear that he was setting me up for a cut in dues.

"Well, I covered all of my bases, offering an enthusiastic and focused overview about the good things we were doing with the public schools, transportation, regional cooperation, and job creation. But I wasn't making much headway as it was clear he wanted to know what was in it 'for him,' not for the company, not for the community, but for him.

"I then went into my 'chamber networking' monologue and how satisfaction levels of our members were in direct proportion to participation. As often as I have told the 'chamber story,' I never was able to hit on just the right analogy that would help him understand the fundamental value of chamber membership. But on this day, I came up with the perfect pitch. I noticed

ON THE AIR

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Story



when we met that his suit fit tight around his shoulders and biceps. This was a man who worked out and had the muscle to show for it. So I said, 'Being a part of the chamber is like joining the health club: You pay to be a member but your return will be in direct proportion to the frequency with which you use your membership. The more you go to gym, the more muscle you build; the more you participate in the chamber, the bigger the benefit. So I invite you to attend three key events during the next three months and then let's have this conversation again.'

"He instantly understood what he needed to do to evaluate the chamber and I gave him three specific places for me to earn his confidence. Within those three months, he attended several major events and subsequently became an active leader in the chamber. While we never held that second meeting, I learned from one of his direct reports that he used the 'health club' analogy in an internal presentation on community involvement, and I have used it again and again to underscore that paying dues is only the first installment in the chamber value proposition."

This is the age-old practice of storytelling at work in the business world. Simply put, storytelling is a means of sharing knowledge, providing leadership, or fostering cultural change by using the power of narrative. Stories can be a compelling way to engage members and prospective members, employees, community leaders, and politicians on an emotional level. Whether over a water cooler or in the board room, or in written form such as case studies, testimonials, "lessons learned", or best practices, stories make knowledge and visions come alive.

The attractions of narrative are obvious: storytelling is natural and easy and entertaining and energizing. Stories help us understand complexity. Stories can enhance or change perceptions. Stories are easy to remember.

Stephen Denning, author of
The Springboard: How Storytelling Ignites Action in Knowledge-Era Organizations

Why it works

"The attractions of narrative are obvious: storytelling is natural and easy and entertaining and energizing," says Stephen Denning, former Knowledge Management Director with the World Bank and author of *The Springboard: How Storytelling Ignites Action in Knowledge-Era Organizations*. "Stories help us understand complexity. Stories can enhance or change perceptions. Stories are easy to remember. Stories are inherently non-adversarial and non-hierarchical. They bypass normal defense mechanisms and engage our feelings."

Storytelling is a helpful tool that supplements facts and business analysis in communications. "Analysis is what drives business thinking," says Denning. "It cuts through the fog of myth, gossip, and speculation to get to the hard facts...its strength lies in its objectivity, its impersonality, its heartlessness. Yet this strength is also a weakness. Analysis might excite the mind, but it hardly offers a route to the heart. Storytelling can."

Strategically linking stories to organizational objectives is a practice used by some of America's top companies and associations, including those as diverse as the American Society for Quality, Harley-Davidson, IBM, Pfizer, the United Way, the U.S. Army, and Xerox. Chambers are also increasingly turning to storytelling as a powerful means of accomplishing their objectives, and are using this tool successfully in many arenas, including economic development, small business development, lobbying, sales, and chamber branding initiatives.

Getting your stories straight

In addition to strengthening sales pitches, as Schmitt did with his reluctant prospect, storytelling can be used to inject the personal element into economic development campaigns and small business services. In Des Moines, Iowa, the chamber partnership recently incorporated storytelling into its "buy local" program guide. The guide features ten success stories about how local businesses expanded, hired more employees, leased additional space, or simply landed a huge contract via the chamber's

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campaign to have members shift five percent of their out-of-area spending back to the “buy-local” area.

“The stories give real-life examples of where businesses might look to shift spending, and educates them about the types of services that are often purchased out-of-area,” says **Susan Ramsey, Senior Vice President of Communications at the Des Moines (IA) Partnership.** “This proof of performance ‘storytelling’ is giving new life to the program by showing businesses how it’s done, as well as what’s in it for them. The program has over 300 active participants, with a first-year shift of more than \$6.5 million. That’s economic development done right.”

In Syracuse, N.Y., the chamber harnessed the power of stories in selling the benefits of a program it manages, the Space Alliance Technology Outreach Program (SATOP), and came up with an entire publication based on stories. Why? Consider the difficulty of explaining this particular service: The program provides up to forty free hours of free engineering services to small businesses. Through the SATOP grant, NASA allows small business to tap into the same brain power that has landed men on the moon and rovers on Mars to solve their more specific and down-to-earth-challenges. These solutions can help the economy, through job growth or more cost-effective production; and they can make a product safer or more reliable.

Now, imagine making this program clear to the manager of the fitness center in need of acoustical engineering assistance

or the security company executive in need of product design assistance. Complicated, right? So, to promote SATOP across New York, the Syracuse Chamber partnered with over forty other chambers and economic development corporations. These organizations spread the word about SATOP and refer small businesses to the chamber.

However, as a group, referrals fell over the course of a year. The chamber’s business analysis determined that the drop in referrals was due to a common misconception about SATOP: because of the program’s NASA connection, small business owners wrongly assumed that only high-tech or aerospace companies could qualify. This often discouraged them from submitting requests for technical assistance, though program documentation stated that the services were available to all types of businesses. At this point, the chamber needed a concise, effective way to clarify the opportunities of the SATOP program and turned to storytelling as a way to reach potential customers. Hence, a success stories publication was born.

“The success stories illustrate how the program has assisted businesses in many different industries,” says **Holly Berlin, Director of Communications, Greater Syracuse (NY) Chamber of Commerce.** “However, the chamber found that these success stories were difficult to remember in detail, and observed that its marketing partners were repeating the same one or two stories to every business, presenting a very limited picture of the program. The solution became a ‘success stories’ booklet inspired by an

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*Nancy Pool, President
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Providing Leadership

- Launching a vision
- Strategic planning
- Persuading others
- Communicating identity
- Motivating others
- Controlling rumors

Knowledge Sharing & Learning

- Exchanging strategies/solutions
- Sharing tacit knowledge
- Communicating complex ideas
- Training through simulations
- Facilitating unlearning
- Career development

Fostering Cultural Change

- Revealing beliefs
- Building trust & commitment
- Conveying values and norms
- Fostering collaboration
- Reconciling conflict

Source: Storywork in Organizations, © 2004 Daniel Gray Wilson, Research Manager at Harvard University's Learning Innovations Laboratories.

annual NASA publication featuring aerospace success stories.” The booklet that the Syracuse Chamber created allows its sales partners to easily find a story sorted by engineering discipline, industry type, or business name.

The effective cost to produce each booklet was just over four dollars and the return has been many times that, according to the chamber’s analysis. “[The booklet] clearly represented real scenarios that businesses could relate to, [and] demystified the NASA image of technology elitism,” said representatives of one of the chamber’s sales partners, the Local Development Corporation of East New York. Last year, the SATOP story booklet was recognized in ACCE’s 2004 Award for Communications Excellence as a Grand Award winner.

Testimonials take over

A recent ACCE Quick Poll on storytelling shows that the most cited form chambers use is the testimonial, typically in new member sales or retention efforts. Testimonials appear on websites, in newsletters, in radio and television spots, and marketing brochures, or are encouraged at new member receptions. Some chambers have made a concerted effort to strategically gather stories that illustrate key membership benefits, and these stories are then used in one or more of its communications vehicles. Staff can be coached in how to draw stories out of members, and the stories can be kept in a central repository for use as needed.

“We use testimonials from our members to sell other members,” says **Saralee Tiede, Vice President of Communications, Greater Austin (TX) Chamber of Commerce.** “Our membership sales book and the membership directory feature testimonials like that of Stephen M. Schultz, who tells how he moved from Dallas to Austin to open his own law firm, knowing only three people in town. His firm joined the chamber and he became a volunteer who made business contacts and clients ‘that I never would have gotten otherwise’. We have six or seven testimonials like this that we feature with photos of the members.”

Chambers use member testimonials in many different ways. “We produce an annual video telling our success stories,” says **Marsha Sheahan, Vice President of Public Relations, Greater Topeka (KS) Chamber of Commerce.** “At our Quarterly Minority Networking Breakfasts, four to six members tell the story of their business. At our Power Marketing Events, up to 70 members get 90 seconds to tell their ‘stories’ to others in attendance. As the word spreads of our members’ successes, the chamber often gets the ‘credit’ and the ‘connection to the story’.”

Public “credit” and “connection to the story” are what help a chamber’s brand image in the community. “Testimonials from businesses segmented by industry, life-cycle, and topic are helpful in communicating our story,” says **Kyle Sexton, Director of Member Services, Salem (OR) Area Chamber of Commerce.** “We’ve always felt that promoting our members above ourselves is selling ourselves. Sometimes, using our members to tell our story is the most effective—and most affordable way—to develop our brand.”



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SNAPSHOT: THROUGH THE YEARS...

Do chambers really have a story to tell? You bet. According to the website of the Greater Cincinnati (OH) Chamber, "To write the history of the chamber would be tantamount to writing a history of the city itself...for the chamber has been involved in virtually every significant city development since its inception." Here's a fun look at some of the landmark events of pop culture which resulted from chamber efforts:

- In *Scarface* Al and the *Crime Crusaders* by Dennis Hoffman, Al Capone credited an insider group at the Chicago Chamber, the "Secret Six," with his downfall. This group, which included the chamber chair Robert Isham Randolph and Sears magnate Julius Rosenwald, wanted Capone's corrosive practices banished and eventually hired Eliot Ness's brother-in-law, Alexander Jamie, to set up sting operations, where Ness then made arrests.
- Charles Lindbergh needed financial backing for his attempt to become the first solo flier to cross the Atlantic, but was \$15,000 short. He was introduced to the head of the St. Louis Chamber, Harold Bixby, who in turn put him in touch with chamber members. As a price for this backing, Lindbergh would have to promote the city and so his plane was named the *Spirit of St. Louis*.
- The Businessmen's League of Atlantic City wanted to keep people coming to the city after Labor Day. So it organized a beauty contest in 1921. Thus, the Miss America Pageant was born, a tradition which endures to this day.
- The chamber in Hollywood, Cal., wanted to promote business in the area so in the early 1960s it refurbished the old real estate sign in the hills, "Hollywoodland." The chamber dropped the "land" and put up the other letters, forming the international icon we see today. The same chamber created the Walk of Fame with the stars representing Hollywood's biggest names, and it still puts in those stars today (even Ryan Seacrest).

While these items relate to fame and glamour, there are plenty of stories of more community-oriented achievement, too, in the history of chambers of commerce. San Antonio's Riverwalk, Baltimore's Inner Harbor, even much of the mighty St. Lawrence Seaway and many other projects, date back to some hard work and heavy lifting at local chambers of commerce.

- Chris Mead, Vice President of Member Relations, ACCE

Mike Varney, Vice President of Marketing, Las Vegas (NV) Chamber of Commerce agrees. "No one can tell our story better than the people who are seeing a return on their investment in the Las Vegas Chamber. It's a real thrill to hear our customers (members) tell us how well we are doing in their own words and with such enthusiasm."

Testimonial-based campaigns are being used by large and small chambers alike across the country. Chambers in larger metro areas, such as Raleigh and Greensboro (NC), Las Vegas (NV), and Richmond (VA), as well as chambers in smaller communities like Carthage (MO), Salem (OR), and Glenwood Springs (CO) have created print, radio, web, and even television spots featuring members telling their stories of finding value in chamber membership.

Chamber stories in news media

Whether you're at a large metropolitan chamber, a small rural chamber, or somewhere in between, getting your chamber "story" in front of the public through the news media could be a critical component of your overall communications plan.

"We tell our story through our members, directors, and community partners," says **Tom Cocchiaro, Communications Manager at the Greater Portsmouth (NH) Chamber of Commerce**. "We use their testimonials in our membership marketing, quote them in our newsletter and news releases and try to make sure our involvement (or quotes about our involvement) is part of every story written about major community issues: workforce housing, transportation infrastructure, support of the arts and cultural community, and so on. We do this by introducing ourselves to the media, educating them on our activities and making our leadership immediately available to them whenever they need information."

The media has a huge appetite for stories, especially related to grassroots lobbying and issue advocacy efforts. Getting those stories out through multiple channels helps ensure a wider audience. "There are many ways of telling stories," says **Mark Schenthal, Public Relations Director, Northern Kentucky Chamber of Commerce**. "We let our public access telecommunications board film our Eggs N Issues and Government Forums each and every month. We found that the public access channel is trying to fill up the air time with substance and we have plenty of pertinent information at the chamber. Not only will they show the last month's events but old events as well. The stories get told several times throughout each month."

Crafting your story

Mining stories from your members and staff to balance data and analysis with emotional intelligence and context doesn't have to be a cumbersome process. In its storytelling guidebook, the American Society for Training & Development (ASTD) highlights six essential steps leaders should take to use the storytelling technique strategically in their organizations.

Six key actions that the strategic use of storytelling requires:

1. Identifying the message you want to send
2. Finding stories to reinforce your message
3. Developing the stories
4. Identifying when and where to tell your stories
5. Telling the stories
6. Soliciting feedback on the message received

Most chambers can identify the messages they want to send to members, prospects, community leaders, elected officials, and other key constituencies. The challenge may come in collecting and coordinating a variety of messages that convey various aspects of a value proposition, such as advocacy, community focus, and economic or business growth opportunities.



Resources

- Stephen Denning, "Telling Tales", Harvard Business Review May 2004
- *Storytelling: Organizational Development*. Karin Hurt and Dennis Metzger, ASTD Infoline 2003.
- *Squirrel Inc: A Fable of Leadership Through Storytelling*, by Steve Denning (Jossey-Bass, June 2004)
- ACCE Convention 2005: St. Louis will feature master storytellers from Harvard University, the World Bank, and SAIC.

National research conducted by North Carolina-based public relations firm The Quixote Group on behalf of ACCE identified five brand promises that the vast majority of chambers are expected by their members to fulfill. These expectations can be expressed in the form of target audience beliefs:

- My chamber membership is a smart business investment.
- My chamber enables me to do and achieve more.
- My chamber creates a climate for success and growth in my community.
- My chamber connects me to important community needs.
- The community values my membership.

These brand promises provide a solid framework and place to begin developing or mining member stories that will reinforce your chamber's unique message. For instance, "If advocacy efforts—whether through grassroots lobbying or through small business development or other activities—are a key component of your chamber's mission, one set of your chamber's stories need to illustrate how your chamber is an advocate for its broad and diverse member businesses, creating a climate of growth and success in your community," says Chuck Mattina, President of The Quixote Group.

Selecting the right stories can also help you meet multiple components of your operational or strategic plans—such as sales and retention. "This year one of our goals is to pay particular attention to the long-term member," says **Marianne Virgili, CCE, President & CEO of the Glenwood Springs (CO) Chamber Resort Association**. "New members get ribbon-cutting ceremonies and lots of personal attention, but we tend to forget about those who for years have been literally 'paying their dues.' So, those are the members we are featuring in testimonial advertising."

Developing your story

Stories should have a clear, relevant message and be interesting to the targeted audience. After selecting the message and target audience, the actual "story" must be developed. "Stories will not always emerge intact with a strong message,

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vivid plot, and engaging characters,” says Karin Hurt in ASTD’s *Storyline*. “Most stories will require some embellishment and practice to make them memorable and meaningful.”

This does not mean that the story teller should, well, tell an untrue story. “When thinking through your story development, remember the good story has a beginning and an end. Consider the best point in time to begin your story, and develop an engaging start that will draw the audience in,” says Hurt. The best way to continue developing your story is to tell it a few times and ask for feedback on how you can improve it.

Storytelling opportunities are plentiful—make sure you choose the appropriate venue and timing. Some chambers share their stories—or encourage members to—at new member receptions, other networking events, board training sessions, strategic planning sessions, in public hearings, or in their general communications and marketing.

Do your homework

Just because you’ve now moved to storytelling doesn’t negate the need for analysis or hard data, or for the use of other communications strategies in leading change, selling, or lobbying effectively. Storytelling can be a powerful tool when integrated

into the chamber’s communications and marketing plans. Getting the whole chamber team—staff and board—involved in collecting and sharing stories can multiply their impact, provided that a targeted approach is used.

Powerful organizational stories are those shared in multiple places, spoken by a multitude of voices, but sharing common vision and purpose. This can be as simple as opening a staff meeting with the question, “Who would like to share a member success story this week?” or as formal as identifying and implementing a story collection process to capture these stories and integrate them into your overall communications and marketing strategy.

Telling stories is a natural form of communicating; regardless of whether or not you implement a formal storytelling framework, people will tell stories. Any steps you can take at your chamber to provide even a small amount of structure and strategic purpose will help enhance this natural phenomenon, give your chamber a communications edge, and help tell the chamber story to all who will hear it. ☐☐

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