

13 Tips for Communicating Effectively by Telling a Good Anecdote

By Dianna Booher

Stories grab attention the way no other technique can. Your anecdote may be serious, sad, humorous, enlightening, or inspiring. It may serve as proof that a situation exists in your organization, an example of what excellent organizations do to lead the industry, the epitome of innovation, a thought-provoking “war story” from one of your front-line employees, or merely a momentary inspiration.

Even with a serious point, humor generally helps. Your purpose is not to bring down the house with wildly funny stories; the audience does not expect Jay Leno or David Letterman. Humor, however, anchors key points and makes your message memorable.

Slanting your story to your audience—their point of view and their mood—adds to the impact. When done well, a humorous story adds an element of class and distinction. Stories pack power.

Know Your Reason for Using a Story

To illustrate a point, to entertain, or to build common ground with your audience—identifying your purpose will make your selection much easier. You also will understand the length of time you should devote to telling it and the effort that should go into telling it well. Never use a \$100 story in a three-minute time slot to make a nickel point.

Set Up the Anecdote in an Intriguing Way

Not: “Let me tell you about a manager in our Miami office.” But: “Managers sometimes exhibit their greatest leadership skills when they make a mistake. This was the case in our Miami office last quarter when . . .”

Choose Relevant, Appropriate Details

It is tempting to talk while you think. Don't. Either work out your story by talking it aloud until you perfect it, or write the story and then edit out the garbage. Ask yourself with each word, phrase, and sentence: Does it add to the mood? Does it create the scene? Is this detail necessary to move the story forward and make the point? Weed out trivial details that detract or add only length.

Prefer Scene to Narrative

Recreate the movie scene, add the dialogue, and step into the story as a character, if necessary, to breathe life into the telling.

Not this narrative: “I had a terrible experience the last time I visited my doctor's office. The receptionist was surly and kept scolding me and other patients for “noise” as if we were children. Customer service certainly isn't what it used to be.”

But this scene: “I’m not one easily persuaded to see a doctor. And I get particularly upset about the lack of customer service in most medical offices. But last fall when my fever reached 103 degrees, I finally stagger into my internist’s office, dehydrated, dizzy, and green from lunch. And the receptionist pushes a clipboard toward me and growls, ‘You’ll need to complete this.’ So I’m sitting there with all the paperwork piled in my lap, scrawling in the blanks: Name, rank, serial number, referring physician, address of hairdresser, IQ. And the clipboard breaks and shoots the spring in the handle across the room into the water cooler with a loud zing. Then this lady beside me starts to sneeze and wheeze so loud that it catches the attention of the toddler with measles next to her. So then the toddler starts to screech at his lung’s capacity, ‘Mommy, what’s she doing?’ About this time, the receptionist opens her cubicle window again and says, ‘Could I ask you people to keep down the noise please. There are sick people in here.’”

Ensure that Every Story Has a Beginning, a Middle, and an End

See the scene in the previous tip about the surly receptionist in the medical office. You will notice that although the story is less than 60 seconds long when delivered, it has a definite beginning, middle, and end. Without all three, your listeners feel as though you are leaving something incomplete. Granted, you do not have to complete the entire story at one time. You may move the story along during an entire presentation to make several key points during your presentation.

Perfect Facial Expression, Voice Tone, and Body Language to Be an Essential Part of the Story

In the same way that both content and delivery work together to make your entire presentation either dynamic or distasteful, a story and its delivery work together to create the total impact. A raised eyebrow, a haughty tone, or a shrug of the shoulders can carry—or reverse—your point.

Let the Punch Line Stand on Its Own

If you have to explain the punch line, it does not work. Play with it until it does. Sometimes the substitution of one key word will make the difference between a laugh and blank stare, between an “aaahhh-haaa” and a “huh?” Practice the punch line and the punch word until others understand it. If they do not, delete it rather than explain it.

Don’t Rush the Laugh Lines or the Pregnant Pauses

Standing silent while a group responds takes courage. Such pauses may be the longest of your career. However, if you rush through them, the audience will take their cue from you and assume that you did not want or intend for them to respond audibly. Their non-response then destroys your confidence to try additional stories in the remaining sections of your presentation. As a result, your delivery gets dryer and dryer. The presentation spirals downward to disappointment.

Remember, the Longer the Story, the Funnier the Punch Line Needs to Be

Attention spans are short. Lengthy stories can lead to big expectations. They end in disappointment with a poorly delivered or less-than-hilarious punch line.

Avoid a Big Buildup That Sets Up Disappointment

Inexperienced speakers warn, “Here comes a joke,” with a lead-in like, “That reminds me of the story about . . .” or “I’ve got a great story that makes a point about X. It’s so funny. You’re not going to believe what this customer really said to me. But I want to tell you about this situation just to illustrate my point about the type of demands our customers are placing on us these days. It’s hilarious. I couldn’t believe he really did this. This guy was really crazy. Just irate. Cursing. Yelling. The whole thing was so ridiculous. Here’s what happened. This customer calls up on our support line and. . . .”

With such a long buildup, the typical group reaction after you tell the anecdote will be, “That wasn’t such a great story. And it wasn’t so funny.”

Just get into the story and then make your point. The audience will let you know if it was funny or not.

Perfect Your Timing

One word botched, mumbled, or out of order can sink the ship. Practice your delivery.

Here’s an example from Rich’s Current Humor Newsletter: “Our After Dinner keynoter comes to us from a humble beginning. He started out as an After Snack speaker.”

Another example by Michael Iapocce: “Most of the speakers you’ll hear today constitute a sort of who’s who in the industry. I’m more in the category of who’s he.”

You’ll notice that one word makes or breaks the entire story. You can’t fumble that word or line in your story.

Rework Your Story Until Perfected

Changing a single word, adding one specific detail, or changing a person’s name can be the difference between confusion and clarity, a laugh and a ho-hum, retention and oblivion.

Rehearse Your Stories and One-Liners “Off Broadway”

Before you use an anecdote “live” in a session or presentation, make sure that it works. And the best way to do this is to see how others react as you tell it. Tell it to your family and friends. Tell it at a cocktail party. Tell it at work in the cafeteria. Where do people laugh? At what details do people’s expressions change? Where do their eyes grow larger? Where are they shocked? Amused? Appalled? On the next telling, play up those parts. Create more suspense. Add more dialogue, less narration.

You will generally improve your delivery with each telling. Sometimes people laugh at things you did not think were the funny part—and vice versa. It is better to know this before telling the story “for real” in your presentation to drive home a key point.

#

1391 words

© Dianna Booher, Booher Consultants, Inc. All rights reserved.

*Dianna Booher works with organizations to increase their productivity and effectiveness through better oral, written, interpersonal, and cross-functional communication. She is a keynote speaker and the author of more than 40 books (22 on communication) including The Voice of Authority, Booher's Rules of Business Grammar, Speak with Confidence, and Communicate with Confidence. Dianna is CEO of **Booher Consultants**, a communication training firm offering programs in presentations skills, business writing, and interpersonal communication. Successful Meetings Magazine named her to its list of "21 Top Speakers for the 21st Century." Executive Excellence Publishing also named Dianna to its "Top 100 Thought Leaders" and "Top 100 Minds on Personal Development." www.booher.com or call 800.342.6621.*

For more tips on using visuals effectively, see Speak with Confidence: Powerful Presentations That Inform, Inspire and Persuade (McGraw-Hill) by Dianna Booher.