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## Article

# Making yourself heard at the customer again – how songwriting facilities successful storytelling

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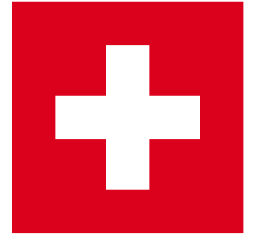
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## Storytelling in Marketing & Sales



Universität St.Gallen

# Making yourself heard at the customer again – how songwriting facilitates successful storytelling

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As the quote above from Philip Pullman, a British writer, highlights, it is innate to human behavior that we are keen on telling as well as listening to stories. Stories not only enable us to better store and retrieve information (Fournier 1998). Even more critically, they also result in “proper pleasure” being cathartic (Holt 2003).

**Prof. Dr. Peter Mathias Fischer, Dr. Johannes Flecker**

**S**torytelling refers to the purposeful presentation of information in a way that personally links the individual to an information, such that meaningful connections between the self and the information or the sender are formed (cf. Escalas 2007). Capitalizing on these effects, stories are utilized in various business contexts. For instance, storytelling is applied to motivate one's employees to work even harder on the completion of a project or to attract investors and partners (Guber 2007). Even academics make use of storytelling. Peracchio and Escalas (2007) provide clear guidelines and recommendations on how to effectively implement storytelling to personally relate the reviewers to the information conveyed, thereby getting one's work published (Peracchio/Escalas 2007).

It is thus no surprise that marketers alike have embraced storytelling. Given the vast amount of information resulting in both customer reactance (e.g., Kivetz 2005) and information overload (e.g., Iyengar/Lepper 2000), marketing specialists have been searching for new ways on how to make themselves heard again at the customer. Since storytelling does not just provide information or entertain customers but reframes the information into a narrative leading to meaningful connections between the brand and the consumer, it has been celebrated as a solution to effectively reach one's customers again (e.g., Woodside/Sood/Miller 2008). To illustrate, while Pulizzi (2012) labels storytelling as the "new marketing", Aaker (2013) regards stories as the "new hot topic in marketing".

In this article, we focus on how companies can successfully create and implement meaningful stories. To our surprise, such an implemental perspective has been rather neglected so far. We propose that the exchange of ideas and best practices might be a good starting point for the implementa-

**“After nourishment, shelter,  
and companionship,  
stories are the thing we  
need most in the world.”**

Philip Pullman

tion of storytelling in one's own company. However, we also argue that companies still have to find their own authentic story to make storytelling a success story.

Addressing this challenge, the current article provides guidelines on how experienced marketing executives can

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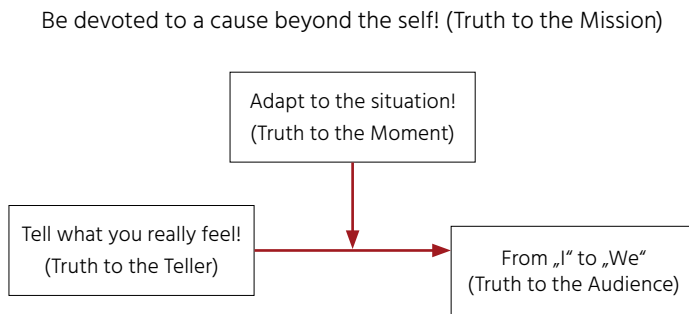
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be enabled to develop exciting stories by themselves. Introducing a new concept, we show how songwriting can increase executives' creativity and help them to develop inspiring stories.

### **Storytelling in Marketing and Sales: Current Research and Managerial Shortcomings**

For storytelling to be effective, consumers first have to be brought in a mode that enables them to process information narratively rather than analytically. According to transportation theory (Gerrig 1993) consumers having been transported to the world of the narrative become fully absorbed into the story world. Escalas (2007) could show that once consumers process information narratively as opposed to analytically, they begin to immerse themselves into the story through self-referencing. Similarly, Hauff et al. (2014) found that portraying a person and her thoughts about saving money rather than listing the very same facts in a neutral way, results in more positive emotions and also increases purchase intention of a savings account.

Finally, Gilliam and Flaherty (2015) extended prior research to a sales context. In a large-scale qualitative study, they found that salespeople regularly use stories and that these stories then are usually appreciated and reciprocated by buyers. However, they also note a potential downside. If storytel-

**Figure 1: The 4 truths of storytelling**

Quelle: Own illustration adapted from Guber (2007).

ling serves as a means to persuade customers of an immediate purchase rather than to bond customers, interview protocols with salespersons indicate that consumers might become suspicious. Their findings thus confirm that consumers are averse to betrayal (e.g., Fischer/Chark 2014) and that, to be successful, storytelling must not evoke any feelings of skepticism.

Hence, companies are facing the challenge of achieving meaningful self-brand connections through storytelling without triggering any feelings of skepticism and without alienating the knowledgeable customer. As outlined in the introduction, knowledge on how companies can successfully develop stories in general and handle this tension in particular is scarce as its best. A noteworthy exception is Guber (2007) who introduced the four truths of storytelling. According to him, storytelling can be successfully implemented, when there is truth to the teller, truth to the mission, truth to the audience, and truth to the moment.

Truth to the teller implies that the storyteller is authentic. (S)he must be able to tell a story that truly fits the actual values of a company and not some desired and fictitious ones. Ideally, truth to the teller means that the storyteller wants the recipient to feel what (s)he feels. This, however, requires that storytellers are able and willing to share emotions. However, many executives seem to shy away from showing such emotions as doing so makes them more vulnerable. Charity:Water is a positive counterexample. Actively telling the story of having been a nightlife promoter in Manhattan who had suffered from “mental bankruptcy” and thus decided to do something meaningful in life, its founder Scott Harrison directly catches the attention of potential customers.

Truth to the mission helps to provide a framework to achieve truth to the teller. Truth to the mission means that a great storyteller is dedicated to a cause beyond self (Guber 2007). This, as in the case of Charity: Water, can be to solve the water crisis. It also can be something more modest such as improving the lives of customers. In any case, however, companies need to have a clear and concise business mission which directly impacts storytelling. This also is not the case in many organizations though.

Truth to the teller and truth to the mission are not sufficient though. Critically, storytelling only is effective if the audience becomes part of the story and if organizations reframe their stories such that they integrate their potential customers in their stories (i.e., truth to the audience). Ideally, consumers believe that they are an important actor of the story or even influence the plot of the story. Smart companies thereby exploit customers’ need for self-enhancement and self-actualization (c.f., Leary 2007). By telling stories about themselves, consumers’ needs to improve their self-concept (i.e., self-enhancement) or to verify their existing views of themselves (i.e., self-actualization) are met. Air Canada is a best practice in this regard. In its loyalty program Air Miles, the airline does not only tell stories about how it rewards loyal customers, but also lets their customers to tell stories on how it feels to get rewarded and on what they do with their rewards (Papadatos 2006).

Finally, Guber (2007) recommends stories to have a truth to the moment. This implies that each story, though being highly integrated, has to have some variation targeted to the specific audience.

Though being a valuable concept it becomes evident that considering the four truths of storytelling imposes a challenge. In the next chapter, we illustrate how songwriting might be helpful to implement stories leading to meaningful self-brand connections.

## Management Summary

Storytelling is a buzzword and multiple studies have shown that Storytelling has beneficial effects in Marketing and Sales. However, little is known about its effective implementation. In other words, how can managers successfully craft stories? Songwriting is valuable in this regard, as it helps managers to tap their creative potential while at the same time being highly structured.

### Songwriting as an Effective Means to Develop and Tell Stories

Songwriting is a centuries-old, universal tool of mankind to tell stories by connecting music and lyrics. It is an art and craft that has never been so ubiquitous as nowadays. The music streaming service Spotify alone has a selection of 30 million songs in its catalogue (Spotify 2015).

By connecting music and lyrics, songwriting enables storytellers to be highly creative and to think out-of-the box. A feature of songwriting is that a set of musical characteristics adds additional layers to a story that trigger emotional, cognitive and physiological effects in the audience. Tempo (fast to slow), dynamics (loud to quiet) and mode (major and minor) are the most important musical dimensions (Bruner

1990). Alterations lead to subtle or drastic changes of the song's emotional and cognitive meaning. Hence, as we could observe in multiple workshops with managers, emotions are rather displayed in such a creative task than in a business meeting where participants don't dare to willingly express their emotions. Since expressing one's emotions is a prerequisite for establishing a high truth to the teller (Guber 2007), songwriting is valuable in this regard.

Furthermore, many songs also obtain different perspectives or cover topics the audience can easily relate to and thus further develop. Since music can be symbolized as a mirror that allows the individual "to observe one's self" (deNora 1999), songwriting is an important feature to express personal stories of the teller. The expression can be directly related to the storyteller's self-concept and his perception of social

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### Lessons learned

- To attempt the use of songwriting in corporate storytelling managers must be aided by professional songwriters with managerial experience
- Managers must, as well, be able to approach new models with an open mindset
- Specific tools and guidelines of lyric writing in song contexts have to be stated in order to create effective songs
- Top managers can use storytelling to define and elaborate on the company's business mission

### Main Propositions

- Storytelling aids companies in creating self-brand connections
- However, to implement storytelling managers must take into account four important moments of truth: "truth to the teller", "truth to the mission", "truth to the audience" and "truth to the moment"
- Through songwriting managers can successfully implement storytelling measures without failing any of the moments of truth

reality (Campbell, Connell, and Beegle 2007). Musical creation is considered an extension of human emotions (Koopman and Davies 2001; Young 1999). It is no surprise that personal experiences and memories occupy a major proportion of popular songs. For example, the Beatles write about childhood references in songs like "Penny Lane" and "Strawberry Fields" (Charles River 2012), Eric Clapton's song "Tears In Heaven" deals with his son's death by accident. Adele's song "Someone Like You" is her reflection of a broken relationship. Obviously, hit songs thus have a few topics that songwriters and audiences alike can relate to. They're most often inspirational or give empowerment, they're dedicated to introspection, a specific lifestyle and hooking up, or

they deal with biographical topics, personal issues or boasting (Hit Songs Deconstructed 2014). Hence, in a nutshell, songwriting enables the storyteller to develop personal and emotional stories that literally strike a chord with the audience and which probably would have been much harder by a paper-and-pencil approach.

Since popular songs follow a specific structure, songwriting not only elicits emotions but it is also a highly organized task. For example, songs typically consist of several verses, a chorus and often a bridge and a prechorus. This structure enables songwriters to develop creativity without losing sight of a clear structure and a purpose. For example, the chorus highlights the main points of the story and it invites the audience to sing along. In the implemented songwriting workshops, executives were able to highlight the truth to the mission in the chorus section. In the verses, they were working on the story development, how they currently feel (i.e., truth to the teller) or they portrayed lead users or other exemplary customers (i.e., truth to the audience). While the prechorus links the verses to the chorus, the bridge is usually used to change the perspective of the story (i.e., from the truth to the teller to truth to the audience).

While truth to the teller can be achieved relatively easily in songwriting, elaborating on the truth of the mission remains a challenging, non-trivial task. Since the culture of a company derives from the company's employees, attempts to achieve the truth to the mission should not be done individually. Instead, rather different views should be integrated to arrive at a single business mission that is unique and perfectly expresses the company's identity. Similarly, in songwriting, teamwork is rather the norm than the exception and also proved to be successful. In the history of the Grammy Awards since 1959, 60 percent of the winning songs in the category "Song Of The Year" were written by at least two songwriters (The Recording Academy 2015). Team songwriting thus also means combining various artistic and personal identities, leading to a single overarching concept that has to be concise (Flecker 2015). One of the world's most successful songwriting duos, John Lennon and Paul McCartney, provide a good example in this regard. While John Lennon was known as the writer with a darker and more depressive musical expression, Paul McCartney brought a brighter, uplifting side to their songs (Charles River 2012). Together, they defined the core of the song and its key message, which they wouldn't have achieved individually, thereby establishing truth to the mission. It thus becomes evident that songwriting in top management teams can be a


powerful tool to define a company's single and unique business mission and to further elaborate on it, being prerequisites for successful storytelling.

## Conclusion

In a business context, storytelling is used as an emotional narrative, as a motivational tool and increasingly as an instrument for marketing and advertising. Songwriting is an effective means for expressing stories, because it adds emotional and cognitive meaning as well as forces songwriters to make decisions and to focus on the essential elements.

There are several limitations to the application of songwriting for corporate storytelling. Obviously, managers normally are typically not able to develop a song independently. However, as experience and practice showed multiple times,

managers, however, do not need to have any musical background to achieve this. Three factors are required instead. First, participating managers need to have professional guidance by songwriters who also have substantial management and marketing expertise. Second, an open mindset to new approaches is critical as well. Third, specific tools and guidelines of lyric writing in song contexts have to be stated in order to create effective songs.

Surprisingly, there is little research in business research about storytelling through songwriting. Further studies are necessary regarding a methodology to enable marketers to effectively use the tool of songwriting and to investigate its impact on customers compared to traditional methods of storytelling. While listening to one's customers is important, companies have to make themselves heard again as well. 

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