

# Mindshare Executive Briefing

## ***Effective Storytelling***

by Dale Coyner (Mindshare '99)

October, 2010

*Whether you're a startup or an established company, communicating your company's unique vision and value in a memorable way is one notable tactic to set yourself apart in a crowded field. But how?*

*Mindshare University recently explored this topic with communication experts from print and broadcast media. The insights, tips, and tricks they shared will help you create presentations, pitches, and papers that will engage your most important audiences.*



Dale Coyner is a member of the Mindshare Class of '99.

Today, Dale helps companies build industry recognition, credibility and sales through case studies, white papers, podcasts and more.

Web: [www.coyner.com](http://www.coyner.com)  
E-mail: [dale@coyner.com](mailto:dale@coyner.com)

## Storytelling Can Be Learned

As executives, we tell stories on a daily basis. We tell stories when we pitch the company. We weave visions of the future for our employees. We share case studies of customer successes with prospects. In fact, as a tool for providing leadership on a day-to-day basis, storytelling could be considered an executive core competency.

While some people seem to naturally connect with audiences and convey concepts quickly, many of us struggle to get our ideas across in a way that's concise and compelling. It's not for a lack of knowledge or passion. Storytelling is an acquired skill, and most often, it's simply a capability we've never fully developed.

However, it's also within anyone's reach to improve. In fact, understanding a few concepts that underlie powerful stories will increase your chances of creating a memorable pitch, writing a business plan with punch, and improving your ability to engage audiences of one or a thousand with equal facility.

## Control Your Own Destiny

How do you start building an effective story? Begin by determining the outcome you want. Cindy DiBiasi, a principal at 3D Communications ([3dcommunications.us](http://3dcommunications.us)) says that thinking about our outcomes first is something we don't do often enough.

"It's one thing to talk about our products and the specifics of how things work, but we need to take a step back and ask 'What is my goal for this particular communication opportunity? How do I want the audience to see me? And how do I want them to feel about the company and the product?'" says DiBiasi. "People will often forget the specifics of what you have to say, but they will remember the emotional impression you left long after," she says.

Liz Sara, founder and CEO of Best Marketing, LLC ([bestmarketing.net](http://bestmarketing.net)) agrees. "Positioning takes place in the mind of the listener and they use their own frameworks and references to interpret what you are saying." According to Sara, "It's your story, so you need to decide how you want to control it."

So where does that control begin?

## Recognize That Less is More

As an expert in your field, you often face an overwhelming desire to tell everyone everything you know about the industry, your products, the opportunity, your answer to the competition, and more. They're all important to you. To your audience? Not as much.



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Liz Sara  
Best Marketing, LLC

That means, as you begin to develop a presentation or paper, *organize your talking points around a few main ideas*. It’s one of the hardest things to do, but also the most necessary.

The reality is that we human folk have a frail recall ability. Typically, the average audience member can only recall a couple of points from any given presentation or paper. And research shows we process things in groups of three. So when you give an audience ten things to think about, which will they remember? Will they recall the key ideas?

Finding and focusing on just a few key points takes practice. As you develop your presentation, pitch or plan, think hard about the essential audience takeaways. Strip out everything else and save it for another time. Here are some ideas that will help.

### **Caring and Sharing**

You can begin to boil down your paper or your presentation to a few key points when you *speak to what your audience cares about*.

From the outset, many companies want to lead a conversation with their products and services because it’s what they know best, says Patty Brown, chief content strategist for BizTechReports.com. “Instead, you need to think about what the audience wants. What are their problems? What are their concerns?,” says Brown. “We often work first to help companies define the problem statement rather than the solution because audiences want to know that you identify with them and their challenges.”

Step out of your role as CEO and ease into the shoes of your audience. What’s most important to the group you’re trying to reach? What are the driving forces in the industry? What are the pressing issues that are top of mind with your audience? Does a group of prospective customers care about how your company history? Probably not. Do they care how your offering can solve their problems? Absolutely.

How about investors—do they want to hear about your feature set or your business model? Sara, who participates in an angel funding group says that companies frequently present to the group as though they are prospective clients, not investors. “They talk to us as if we want to license their technology and they forget what we’re there to evaluate. We hear all about their set of features and why it’s better than a competitor’s. They spend too little time addressing what we care most about. How will this idea make money? Why should I pull out my checkbook and invest in this company,” says Sara. (The answer, for those playing along, is “business model.”)



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Cindy DiBiasi  
3D Communications

Another sure-fire way to hold the attention of your audience is to *deliver something of value*. Says Brown, “Our goal for each paper we write is to offer readers something new, something personal, and something relevant. When we do that, we deliver something of value.” What an audience finds valuable, of course, differs from one to the next.

For example, delivering value in a business plan may mean showing how your product attacks an industry problem from a *fresh angle*, or how your business model employs a *novel twist* on an old concept. In a white paper, offering something of value means you are *adding something new* to the body of knowledge and offering your reader new *insights or models*. If you’re developing a webcast, why not share some of the *best practices* you’ve developed in the course of your career? Your audience will recognize your industry expertise and they will remember your willingness to help them improve their business. Imparting value leaves a powerful impression on your audience.

Finally, you don’t need to rely on your voice alone to carry the day. Employ the help of partners, customers and industry luminaries to make your point. Adding the voices and perspectives of others through case studies and quote is a potent way to add depth, credibility, and punch to any written or oral communication. In a presentation, telling customer stories offers you a way to shift the “burden of proof” from yourself to someone else. “Look, don’t just take my word for it, here’s what our customers are saying about this...” It’s easy, it’s powerful and it’s unique.

So let’s recap. You’ve whittled your presentation down to three main talking points. You are focusing on topics your audience cares about and you’ve included some customer voices and outside perspectives. Finally, your presentation is going to give them some fresh insights they won’t get from anyone else. With a good foundation established, what’s next?

### **Help Them Remember**

It’s time to put that great content into a framework that will give your audience the mental hooks they need to remember those killer insights you’ve shared. Frameworks are a memory aid and they help people naturally assimilate the information you’re trying to convey.

Using the Rule of Three, one popular structure is the “Time” framework. For example, your presentation may start with a talking point that outlines the state of the industry twenty years ago. (Twenty days ago if your topic is social media.) Next, you move to the present day and discuss the way things are today, how things have changed for better or worse.



“Offer readers something new, something personal and something relevant. When you do that, you deliver value.”

Patty Brown  
BizTechReports.com

Your last set of points revolves around some period of time in the future. With this model, you’re not locked into past, present and future. Your time points might start at today, two years from now and five years from now.

Other frameworks are similar, but give the audience different hooks. For example, the “Perspectives” framework looks at an issue from the viewpoint of different stakeholders. In financial reform, you might speak to a single issue, but examine it from the perspective of customers, banks and the government. In matters of policy, a variety of world perspectives would work well. In a business opportunity, try customer challenges, followed by typical industry responses, and close with your unique approach to solving the problem.

Another popular framework is the “Day in the Life.” This approach is useful for demonstrating the experience customers will have with your product or service during a day in the life of someone who uses your offerings. It’s a way to bridge the feature set of your product with the real-life challenges of users and it helps your audience make an emotional connection to your story. Emotions, as you may recall, stick with audiences long after the facts.

### **The Wrap Up**

An effective storyteller is more than someone who can “spin a good yarn.” It is the person who approaches each important communication event with a plan.

That plan begins by shaping your message to leave your audience with a lasting positive impression. It includes addressing the special concerns and needs of your audience and offering them ideas and perspectives they can get nowhere else. Crafting an effective story often means you must trim your message, sticking to a few key themes throughout your presentation.

When you apply a few of these ideas, the stories you tell are bound to leave your audience wanting more, a formula that will lead them to seek you out for the rest of the story. And to what end?

“The follow up call,” says Brown. “That’s an outcome any entrepreneur would be happy to achieve.”

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