

THE CUSTOMER WHISPERER | BY GREG BILLINGS

# Art of Story-selling

Last month's column, "The 17 Minute Rule," addressed the importance of keeping presentations short and using personal stories to frame your important points. This month, we are going to consider how to construct compelling, engaging stories.

At least once a week, a parent tells us some version of, "We want to start our kid on a cheap instrument because we really don't believe they will stick with it. If they get good, then we will buy something better."



**A good story can be more persuasive than a list of product specs**

It's frustrating because the parents really haven't thought this idea through. They are just following the path of least resistance. We want to help, but we don't want to get into an argument. In the piano segment, it is particularly problematic because parents mistakenly believe that a keyboard will be adequate for their kids starting piano. Rather than bombard them with credible statistics, we use this short story to turn them around:

"When I was a freshman in college, I took Psychology 101. I didn't learn much about psychology, but I learned quite a bit about rats. It seems that if you want the rats to run from one end of a maze to the other, you have to use some cheese. Without cheese, the rats just mill around aimlessly. If we want our kids to succeed we have to provide a proper reward for their effort. The teacher is going to teach, the kids are going to practice, and you are going to drive them to lessons and recitals and pay for everything. But, the reward comes when they kids touch the keys. If they get the beautiful sound of a string vibrating over a piece of spruce [at this moment I play a C chord on the piano] they are going to be a lot more motivated than if they hear a squeaky sound coming out of a little speaker. Most experts agree that kids need a good instrument right from the start and you can rent a good piano for less than the cost of a buying bad piano. There is a reason the drop out rate is so high for kids who don't have real pianos."

This story works because it follows a prescribed formula.

First, it is personal — our listener can identify with being a college freshman. Second, it is engaging — they can visualize the rats milling around. Next, it is aspirational — it is about giving their kids the best opportunity to succeed. It's dramatic because the difference in sound between a piano and a keyboard. It is persuasive because it is so logical and offers a solution. Additionally, it uses just enough fear to be taken seriously. And, it all takes less than a minute to tell.

## BECOME A STORY TELLER

Fortunately, many of our brands have wonderful histories. After World War II, Ikutaro Kakehashi opened a radio repair shop in a storefront smaller than a Manhattan studio apartment. From that humble beginning he built Roland, the largest electronic musical instrument company in the world. Along the way he invented the first practical drum machine — the organ that became the Hammond Pieper which was the forerunner of today's electronic keyboards all while leading the team of manufacturers that made MIDI a industry standard and also pioneering all those little stomp boxes to which guitar players are hopelessly addicted.

Dick Dolan transformed QRS from a player piano roll cutter into a high-tech engineering firm making state-of-the-art digital player piano systems. Leo Fender may not have invented the first electric guitar, but he definitely invented the electric bass guitar. In 1909, William F. Ludwig and his brother Theobald invented the modern bass drum pedal in the old Omaha Building in Chicago and went on to build the company that made the drum set Ringo Starr played on *The Ed Sullivan Show* 55 years later. Every company has a tale to tell and your customers will probably respond better to these real people and their real stories than they will to features or specifications.

Today's clients are used to being spoon fed and entertained. They have very short attention spans. That's why they are not impressed with facts, especially technical facts and especially presented orally. But, they will respond to a story.

As early as 522 B.C., Darius the Great was carving stories into stone walls to justify his kingship of Persia. Jesus used parables to help his disciples understand theological concepts. Government propaganda, from the French Revolution to the current troubles in Ukraine, has used clever tales of harm and threat to create fear, hide their cunning and rally citizen support.

#### ENGAGE YOUR CUSTOMERS

The best stories clarify features and concepts, or deal with objections, in a way that will hold our customers attention and help them better understand. Knowing this, construct just a few stories to address your most common challenges. They should be personal, engaging, dramatic and aspirational to be persuasive. They should conclude with a solution dependent on your product. Feel free to use props and don't hesitate to imply just a little fear.

Let's not forget that people love pictures. In my office I have adjacent pictures of my grandfather's band from the '30s, my dad's band from the '50s and my band from the late '60s. None of those pictures have much to do with pianos, but customers really like hearing about my family and it seems to change the entire dynamic of my time with them.

It is a simple fact of human nature that we are hardwired to respond to stories. You

have a story to tell. But maybe you're not telling it. Or not telling it often enough, or to the right people. Think about how you came to be in a music store, what you have learned along the way and the interesting people you have met. You will find your stories.

Make sure to tell your stories over and

over again and refine them until they are perfectly natural. Your customers will respond and you will have more fun doing your job of gently guiding clients through the decision making process. **MI**

Greg Billings whispers to customers at the Steinway Piano Gallery in Naples, Florida. He welcomes questions and comments at [greg@steinwaynaples.com](mailto:greg@steinwaynaples.com).

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