

Why Storytelling Is *The* Ultimate Weapon

By Jonathan Gottschall

Jonathan Gottschall, author of *The Storytelling Animal*, says science backs up the long-held belief that story is the most powerful means of communicating a message.

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In business, storytelling is all the rage. Without a compelling story, we are told, our product, idea, or personal brand, is dead on arrival. In his book, *Tell to Win*, Peter Guber joins writers like Annette Simmons and Stephen Denning in evangelizing for the power of story in human affairs generally, and business in particular. Guber argues that humans simply aren't moved to action by "data dumps," dense PowerPoint slides, or spreadsheets packed with figures. People are moved by emotion. The best way to emotionally connect other people to our agenda begins with "Once upon a time..."

Plausible enough. But claims for the power of business storytelling are usually supported only with more story. Guber, for example, backs up his bold claims with accounts of how he, or one of his famous friends, told a good story and achieved a triumph of persuasion. But anecdotes don't make a science. Is "telling to win" just the latest fashion in a business world that is continually swept with new fads and new gurus pitching the newest can't-miss secret to success? Or does it represent a real and deep insight into communications strategy?

I think it's a real insight. I'm a literary scholar who uses science to try to understand the vast, witchy power of story in human life. Guber and his allies have arrived through experience at the same conclusions science has reached through experiment.

Until recently we've only been able to speculate about story's persuasive effects. But over the last several decades psychology has begun a serious study of how story affects the human mind. Results repeatedly show that our attitudes, fears, hopes, and values are strongly influenced by story. In fact, fiction seems to be more effective at changing beliefs than writing that is specifically designed to persuade through argument and evidence.

What is going on here? Why are we putty in a storyteller's hands? The psychologists Melanie Green and Tim Brock argue that entering fictional worlds "radically alters the way information is processed." Green and Brock's studies shows that the more absorbed readers are in a story, the more the story changes them. Highly absorbed readers also detected significantly fewer "false notes" in stories--inaccuracies, missteps--than less transported readers. Importantly, it is not just that highly absorbed readers detected the false notes and didn't care about them (as when we watch a pleurably idiotic action film). They were unable to detect the false notes in the first place.

And, in this, there is an important lesson about the molding power of story. When we read dry, factual arguments, we read with our dukes up. We are critical and skeptical. But when

we are absorbed in a story we drop our intellectual guard. We are moved emotionally and this seems to leave us defenseless.

This is exactly Guber's point. The central metaphor of *Tell to Win* is the Trojan Horse. You know the back story: After a decade of gory stalemate at Troy, the ancient Greeks decided they would never take Troy by force, so they would take it by guile. They pretended to sail home, leaving behind a massive wooden horse, ostensibly as an offering to the gods. The happy Trojans dragged the gift inside the city walls. But the horse was full of Greek warriors, who emerged in the night to kill, burn, and rape.

Guber tells us that stories can also function as Trojan Horses. The audience accepts the story because, for a human, a good story always seems like a gift. But the story is actually just a delivery system for the teller's agenda. A story is a trick for sneaking a message into the fortified citadel of the human mind.

Guber's book is relentlessly optimistic about the power of story to persuade. But as the bloody metaphor of the Trojan Horse suggests, story is a tool that can be used for good or ill. Like fire, it can be used to warm a city or to burn it down. Guber understands this, but he emphasizes story's ability to bring on change for the better. His book is about people who tell good stories to overcome resistance, usually for laudable reasons. But, approached from a slightly different angle, *Tell to Win* is a book about highly capable, experienced professionals suckering for story over and over (and over) again.

So there are two big lessons to take from Guber's book and from the new science of storytelling. First, storytelling is a uniquely powerful form of persuasive jujitsu. Second, in a world full of black belt storytellers, we had all better start training our defenses. Master storytellers want us drunk on emotion so we will lose track of rational considerations, relax our skepticism, and yield to their agenda. Yes, we need to tell to win, but it's just as important to learn to see the tell coming--and to steel ourselves against it.

The new gospel of business storytelling offers a challenge to common views of human nature. When we call ourselves *Homo sapiens*, we are arguing that it is human sapience--wisdom, intelligence--that really sets our species apart. And when we think we can best persuade with dispassionate presentation of costs and benefits, we are implicitly endorsing this view. But we are beasts of emotion more than logic. We are creatures of story, and the process of changing one mind or the whole world must begin with "Once upon a time."

Jonathan Gottschall teaches English at Washington and Jefferson College and is the author The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human, published by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. His work has been featured in the New York Times Magazine, Scientific American, and the Chronicle of Higher Education, among others.