The story factor - inspiration, influence and persuasion through the art of storytelling by Annette Simmons

http://www.amazon.co.uk/Story-Factor-Inspiration-Persuasion-Storytelling/dp/0465078079

IN A NUTSHELL

Storytelling is the oldest tool of influence in human history. It has the power to cut-through and be listened to. It connects with us at a deeper level and thus avoids critical analysis. Its subtlety allows a message to enter where rational logic would be rejected. Stories are carriers of meaning so can help create reframe/shift a person’s perspective. Stories linger around so their power of influence stays on long-after rational facts are forgotten.

THE BOOK

Truth, naked and cold, had been turned away from every door in the village. Her nakedness frightened the people. When Parable found her, she was huddled in a corner shivering and hungry. Taking pity on her, Parable gathered her up and took her home. She dressed Truth in story, warmed her and sent her out again. Clothed in story, Truth knocked again at the villagers’ doors and was readily welcomed into the peoples’ houses. They invited her to eat at their table and warm herself by their fire....

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THE MYTH OF LOGIC

The power of story to shift behaviour - Jesus, Mohammed and all the other religious founders understood the power of story to influence and change people’s behaviour. They did not rely on a litany of facts to convince but used story instead. Likewise the Greeks used myths and legends to guide moralistic behaviour of their societies. Why should story be any less powerful today?

Logic does not persuade - Powerpoint presentations rarely convince. Many a presentation cuts out rhetoric and focuses on hard facts. They fail to cut-through and communicate. Facts do not have life - they are inert. Story brings facts to life.

Decision-making is not driven by facts - People do not need more facts - they need wisdom. Rarely is lack of information the cause of poor decision making - it's more often caused by people either ignoring the facts, not understanding the facts or not giving certain facts the importance they merit. Story helps provide meaning, shape and relationship to the data - it paints a picture from the cacophony of dots.

Logic draws up the battle lines - Influence is classically described as a power struggle with two points of view in opposition. Persuasion, manipulation, bargaining, bribery or coercion are inferior methods of influence as the greater the ‘push’ the greater the resistance. Pushing hard against a persons’ beliefs are more likely to further cement their point of view. Getting someone to admit they are wrong (and we are right) just brings egos to war. Story lets egos sleep. Facts suggest a solid inflexible truth about them that draws a line in the sand. This then sets up a confrontational situation that either leads to stale mate or a win/loss. Instead their beliefs need to be gently eroded - and storytelling can play a key role. Story works in a different way - story is less direct - it bypasses the power struggles and operates in a more gracious way and prompts less resistance. We influence by deliberately trying not to influence.

Often in meetings there is a stalemate situation with both sides not budging. The author tells her story of walking her dog. The dog goes one way round a lamp post and she the other. So neither of them can carry on walking to their destination. It is only when both she and the dog back up and walk one side can further progress be made. Everyone understands the metaphor, but being stated through story allows it to be said.

Story works under the radar - Stories get past the rational, critical mind and mines deep down into our emotions at an unconscious level. A good story induces a state of trance whereby the critical conscious mind becomes engaged in the narrative, allowing the moral/meaning of the story to sink into the unconscious unchallenged. Critically, the audience makes sense of the story from their own perspective so becomes personally embedded deep within them. It then influences their perception, thoughts, feelings and behaviour.
Emotional decision making - Research has shown that our choices are primarily driven by emotions. Thus appealing to rational logic rarely ‘affects’ a decision shift. Stories on the other hand operate at an emotional level and thus have a greater potential to influence.

Stories allow people to change their own minds - Story pulls people rather than pushes them. People value their own conclusions more highly than others - a decision reached at personally is thus more effective than one that someone feels pressurised to make. If the story is good enough, then the audience will come to their own conclusion without being pushed.

**STORY AS HOLDERS OF MEANING**

We store information in stories - Stories and storytelling lies at the core of intelligence. Neurologists believe 70% of what we learn comes through stories. Furthermore, we store memory in stories and information gets translated into wisdom when it’s converted into a story.

Stories hold meaning - We are all searching for meaning in this world - to try to make sense of our lives and the world we live in. Story is a receptacle of meaning and has always been used as a way to help make sense of an unjust, unpredictable world (cf gods, monsters, religion and now the new narrative of science).

Stories reframe meaning - Stories can be used to help shift perspective (in a subtle manner), allowing us to reframe the meaning we put onto something. One of the issues is that once people have a story, they chose the facts that support their story (and ignore the evidence that does not fit it). Their story is more powerful than the facts. Behaviour is driven by meaning. So in order to shift behaviour one needs to change the meaning people put on things. Story can do that better than rational logic. Present them new facts that contradict their beliefs (housed in their own story) and they will just choose to discredit, delete or distort them. What one needs to do instead is to give them a new story.

Stories create meaning out of data - To help bring alive data and facts we need to wrap a story around them (otherwise the audience will create their own story around them). Thus when we weave a story around data, we invoke a greater power than the sum of the facts we report.

People find their own meaning within a story - The beauty about story is the listener will take out of it the message that is important to them (Thus it’s advised to avoid stating the moral of the story as often their story is not our story).

**STORIES HELP US CONNECT AND CUT THROUGH**

A story builds rapport - Storytelling helps us find a common point of connection as they will find their own unique personal connection into our story (Humans listen to other peoples stories to validate their own story). And when our story is engaged with, they unconsciously let us in. This creates a bridgehead that allows further communication to be heard. Far too...
many people forget that the key to influence is first to create rapport - it does not matter how brilliant our arguments are, if we are not listened to, then we cannot influence.

A story connects deeply · Stories trigger or uncover insights that engage with us through their truth. It’s the emotional intensity that surrounds this truth that adds impact, depth and importance to the story. Tell the right story and we can make the toughest, most cynical person melt.

A story can cut through and create engagement · What Kafka said about a good book can be applied to story: ‘It should be an axe for the frozen sea around us’.

STORIES AS VEHICLES
Stories spread · A story is like a virus - it grows rapidly and gets spread easily. It is an easily transferable vehicle of ideas and meaning. A great story gets replayed time and again within our heads and then gets retold to others.

Stories linger long after · The beauty about story is it lingers in the mind long after our audience with them has finished, so it has more time to create an effect.

Stories are easily re-triggered · Symbolism, like metaphor can trigger a whole story to be replayed every-time that one image or word is used.

One executive gave his staff ‘forgiveness coupons’ as a symbolic gesture for them to be okay about taking risks - and told them they all had to use them before the year end!

COMPLEXITY
Life is complex · The reality is life is non linear. It is dis-ordered, complex, dynamic and contradictory. Yet we live in a culture of ‘control’ and ‘order’ - we like things to be clear and defined: good vs evil, win vs lose, right vs wrong, black vs white - when in reality life has many shades of grey. Logical analysis implies a simplistic cause-effect relationship which does not hold-up in reality. Story can be more multi-layered than fact and is better able to capture the complexities and contradictions of real life.

PERSONAL STORIES VS FABLES
The power of an authentic personal story · Authentic personal stories are the most powerful to tell. The paradox about storytelling is the more specific a story is, the greater its universality. To evoke an emotion about their mother, tell a very specific story about your mother. The author suggests to find powerful stories from our own life. Then learn to retell the story from that same place. By doing so, we reconnect with all the energy, passion and authority it once held.

Whirlpool sent eight trainees to live in a house for a week to try all of their home appliances because they realised that it’s personal stories that sell their products not lists of features (http://www.fastcompany.com/38274/whirlpool-get-real-customers)

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The use of fables or other's stories - Whilst personal stories have great power, telling of fables can also have an impact. Likewise telling another person's real story can also create impact.

**STORY LISTENING AS A TOOL OF INFLUENCE**

Listening to their story - Listening can often be the most powerful form of persuasion. Everyone needs to feel like their lives are important - this is a deep vein that storytelling helps to access (“To be a person is to have a story to tell”). Encouraging people to tell their story (and critically to listen to their story) is a powerful way to ensure that one really understands what they think and feel about an issue. It also helps build trust and respect so our story also gets listened to (cf Stephen Covey's principle of ‘Seek first to understand before being understood’). Sometimes truly ‘witnessing’ (and hence validating) a person’s story allows them to let that story go and move on. That’s because they often hear it properly for the first time themselves and may create new meaning in the telling.

**THE SIX STORIES WE NEED TO KNOW HOW TO TELL TO HELP INFLUENCE OTHERS**

1. *Who I am* story
2. *Why I am here* story
3. *The vision* story
4. *Teaching* stories
5. *Values in action* stories
6. *I know what you are thinking* stories

**Who I am stories**

Trust - Trust is a key driver of influence. A New York Times/CBS News poll, revealed that 63% of people believe that in dealing with most people, you can’t be too careful, and 37% believe that most people would try to take advantage if they got the chance. Yet for people they know personally, they expect them to be fair. Thus ‘knowing someone’ is key to influence. *Who I am* and *Why I am here* are the key stories one first needs to tell, as without being trusted, then they will not want to listen to our point of view.

Back story - Our ‘backstory’ is one of our greatest assets in building credibility and trust. Demonstrating (via a story) of how we are who we are is more influential than just saying who we are now.

> Robert Cooper, author of Executive EQ chose to tell a personal story about what he learned from his Grandfather (“Give the world the best you have and the best will come back to you”).

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We connect through our frailties. Often revealing a personal degree of self-disclosure/vulnerability/flaws helps. We know that true strength is found not in perfection but in understanding our limitations. It suggests real authenticity (e.g. when we hear of a tough boss who stayed up all night to nurse his sick dog, it makes them appear more human). When we expose these inconsistencies we demonstrate our authenticity and this allows a deeper point of connection with the listener. This connection then forms a bridge for further communication.

Why I am here stories
People are sceptical. When we fail to influence it’s often because people filter our words through negative suspicions. If people understand what we might gain, then it lifts the veil of suspicion. If we hide our gain, then our message is tainted by a lack of incongruity. It’s okay to have personal goals as long as it is transparent (Deceit is the greater crime). Story helps reduce these barriers to our message. Merely saying ‘trust me’ is less effective than telling a story about trust.

One businessman tells the story of how he came from an impoverished childhood, hence why money was so important for him.

The vision stories
A real vision connects with people at a deep level. It provides a driving personal purpose/reason that overcomes the daily struggles and makes the effort worthwhile.

Teaching stories
Whatever role in life, at times we need to teach people skills/experience that we have. Often the teaching is more about the mindset/underlying meaning than the actual skill. And storytelling is an ideal vehicle for this.

A Haitian cab driver shared his Grandfather’s favourite saying, ‘The man who beats his horse will soon be walking’. The indirectness of this story (told to a manager who kept criticising her team) got through more powerfully than any direct communication did.

Values in action stories
Values are the underlying drivers of behaviour. We do things that are important to us (i.e. in line with what we value). Telling a story of success or failure captures the deeper essence of that value than merely stating it.

I know what you are thinking stories
Having an insight into how another person is thinking or feeling is key to drive engagement. If we can name their objections first, then our counter arguments are much more likely to be listened to. Telling such stories can help neutralise concerns without direct confrontation.
CRITICISMS

A key discipline we all need to develop is the skills of critical thinking - spotting the underlying, often unconscious paradigms that drive our behaviour (the goldfish does not know he is in a goldfish bowl - nor do we). This book at least starts to open our eyes to the fact that the paradigm of rationality used in business may not be the way we make decisions (or can be influenced).

As one would expect from a book about storytelling, it is very light on scientifically driven evidence. It is instead a treatise on the subject written from a heuristic angle rather than a logico-deductive stance. It is of course full of great stories which due to brevity I have had to exclude (The irony of this does not escape me!)

That said, as oft is the case, the author sees storytelling as the magic elixir for everything. In reality, not all influence interventions work - nor will stories. There are of course appropriate and non appropriate times and events to utilise story.
Mastering the power of storytelling

This workshop will teach you how to use storytelling to improve your influence, authority and presentation skills.

It will provide opportunity to discover, develop and hone your personal stories for powerful effect.