

THE BUSINESS OF STORYTELLING

Fairy tales aren't just for kids. Here's how storytelling can boost your career, company and life

by HELMI YUSOF

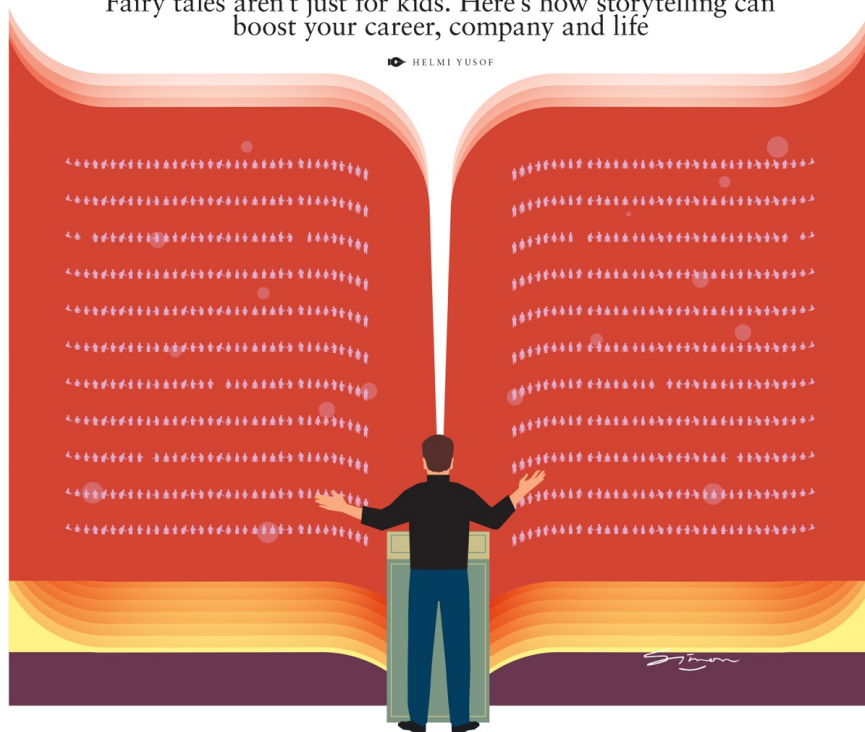


ILLUSTRATION: SIMON ANG; PHOTOS: KAMINI RAMACHANDRAN

ONCE UPON A time, there was a CEO who ruled over a sleepy kingdom. Whenever he delivered a speech, he'd find his subjects nodding off en masse. One day the CEO received a mysterious email containing a YouTube link of Steve Jobs delivering a keynote at Apple's Worldwide Developers Conference 2002 in San Jose.

Before an audience of thousands, the late Apple CEO placed an actual casket on stage. He propped a large box marked "Mac OS 9" inside the casket and proceeded to read a beautiful eulogy. It went: "Mac OS 9 was a friend to us all. He worked tirelessly on our behalf... except occasionally when he forgot who he was and needed to be restarted... Mac OS 9 is survived by his next generation, Mac OS 10, and thousands of applications."

When Jobs was finished with the eulogy, he closed the casket, waved it goodbye, and turned to face a receptive audience to tell them about the new and improved Mac OS 10.

The CEO of Sleepy Kingdom was intrigued by the video. He wanted to know who sent the link, so he emailed the questions: "Who are you? Why have you sent me this?" The answer that came back almost immediately read: "I'm a storytelling consultant. And I could help you deliver better speeches."

Of course, Sleepy Kingdom doesn't exist. But storytelling consultants do and have become the default go-to for CEOs in need of better brand storytelling skills. In fact, authors, playwrights, screenwriters, drama teachers, voice coaches and others skilled in the literary and theatrical arts have also been roped in by companies to help their leaders tell more captivating stories about their companies.

STORIES GO MAINSTREAM

Over the weekend, Kamini Ramachandran, one of Singapore's leading storytelling experts, collaborated with The Arts House for the third edition of StoryFest, an annual gathering of storytellers from around the world.

Many events centred on fiction storytelling, but the events to sell out first were drama teacher Edmund Chow's "Storytelling and Leadership", as well as storytelling maestro David Novak's two sessions, one on storytelling as a classroom strategy, and the other on storytelling for creative communication. The courses were targeted at working professionals, and demand was so overwhelming, the organisers had to open up more spaces to accommodate additional participants.



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Why has storytelling gained so much momentum in the corporate world – even though charismatic teachers, good salesmen and top leaders have always known the value of telling a good story? Ms Ramachandran says: "The demand for storytelling skills comes at a time when most people are overwhelmed by the amount of information out there. It's getting harder for companies to reach an audience and be heard... So increasingly, companies are turning to professional storytellers for possible solutions."

Ms Ramachandran says: "People are wired from birth to receive information in the form of memes – not memes in the social media sense of funny viral photos – but rather memes that are cultural information passed from one generation to another."

Specifically, these memes include rhythms, repetition and patterns in storytelling, which allow a new generation of listeners to enjoy and



(1 & 2) Kamini Ramachandran looks to the history of storytelling to find lessons for her corporate clients on how to tell better stories about their companies.

remember a story easily, and then transmit the information to others. "Unfortunately, a lot of information conveyed today has no repetition, no pattern, and no interaction with the audience. The information has no beginning, middle and end – as stories do – so there's little recall."

Ms Ramachandran, who's been coaching leaders for over a decade, says: "In ancient times, storytellers often had to tell the same story again and again, sometimes to the same group of people. So these storytellers learnt different ways of telling it, such as switching the character from whose perspective the story is told, or taking on different voices... In a similar way, CEOs often have to tell the same story about their companies repeatedly to different audiences, so they might want creative ways of telling that story, so that the audience – and they themselves – won't be bored."

“YOUR STORY MUST GO BEYOND PRODUCT DETAILS, BEYOND PRODUCTION TARGETS, TO THE LARGER PURPOSE OF YOUR EXISTENCE.”

~ DAVID NOVAK



1

SCEPTICISM ABOUNDS

Dr Chow says not everyone is convinced about the power of corporate storytelling: “Some people think this is fluff. They want hard facts and decisions. They don’t want ‘tall tales.’” The program leader in M.A. Arts Pedagogy and Practice at LASALLE College of the Arts thinks that the notion of brand storytelling might have begun in the 1990s, but only gained momentum in the past few years, as TED Talks on storytelling get millions of views, and companies urge leaders to place their message in stories so it’s more accessible and compelling for the staff.

In Dr Chow’s StoryFest class on storytelling and leadership, he used as a teaching guide Joseph Campbell’s classic 1949 book, *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*, which finds commonalities in the mythical stories of heroes told by various cultures. Typically, a hero is faced with a challenge he must confront. The journey is long and arduous, filled with monsters and villains. But the hero persists and eventually finds “reward” and “resurrection”.

Dr Chow got the course participants to write a story about themselves and their companies – but framed as a heroic journey. A typical story written by the participants might begin with: “Once upon a time, there was a company that couldn’t cope with the widespread technological disruption. They tried various things to improve their bottom line, but their profit margins were shrinking fast...”

The story goes on to detail how the company managed to overcome the challenge



2



3

through unusual and innovative solutions, which needed several trials and tweaks to get right – before the company found true “reward” and “resurrection”. As various participants read out their stories before the class, it became clear how much more compelling these stories were compared to the standard speech.

Dr Chow then asked the participants to apply the template of the hero’s journey to their own lives, so that they can tell engaging stories about themselves. He says: “Contrary to the idea of the CEO as an infallible being, it may be helpful for them to tell stories about how they overcame their own weaknesses and shortcomings to get to where they are now. It makes them look more human and sympathetic in the eyes of the staff.”

(1) David Novak applies lessons from Shakespeare to modern day communication techniques. (2) Dr Edmund Chow gets his participants to think about their lives and careers using the framework of Joseph Campbell’s stages of the hero’s journey. (3) Storyteller Hafiz Rashid narrates a story from the region.

COMPANIES NEED STORIES

Storytelling expert Novak says: “The most effective leaders have a good grasp of story. They may not be entertaining storytellers, but they understand the organising principles of their company’s stories, and the role story plays in creating a healthy work culture and a coherent public identity.”

Corporate leaders must be able to “speak a language other than numbers, spreadsheets and bottom lines. A corporation, like any healthy body, needs a heart. And an effective leader understands the heart of their corporation’s story... and can transfer experience, and not just data.”

Good corporate storytelling should also be concerned with the human values. Giving the example of a toothbrush manufacturer, he says: “If your story is merely to make the

least expensive toothbrush for the highest profit margin, it lacks humanity. Your story must go beyond product details, beyond production targets, to the larger purpose of your existence: the vision of the better world resulting from your good efforts... When you know your core story, all other decisions radiate outward to affect the entire corporation.”

In fact, one reason why Mr Novak is against companies cutting costs and manpower is the loss of stories: “Cost-cutting and loss of personnel can be damaging to certain elements of corporate health such as memory, identity, shared purpose and morale. It may seem practical from a book-keeping perspective, but in terms of the valuable knowledge of senior employees, it is the cultural equivalent of a lobotomy. An employee who does not understand their role in the corporation will invent poor stories, such as gossip and conspiracy theories, to fill that gap.”

He recalls the words of a vice-president of a major American corporation lamenting the change in her workplace culture. “She told me: ‘I used to be that getting the right idea was the most important thing. Didn’t matter where it came from. Then, one day, someone attached their name to the winning solution of some problem and leveraged that into a promotion. From that point on, it was everyone for themselves.’”

The best companies, he says, have a healthy storytelling culture. The worst companies have unhealthy storytelling cultures where there is disinformation, gossip and confusion: “True storytelling builds relationships, maintains memory and allows for shared understanding and problem solving.”

PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

Beyond the corporate world, however, storytelling is also becoming popular not just in libraries, beer pubs and literary events – but also in counselling and therapy. Rachel Yang is a registered art therapist and managing partner of Daylight Creative Therapies. She helps her clients deal with various issues such as complex trauma, depression and anxiety, as well as grief and loss.

One of the storytelling methods she employs involves having the client make a simple doll out of cloth, buttons and thread. Often, these dolls are a reflection of the client’s state of mind. Sometimes, this is

augmented by having the client also write a story about the doll, themselves or anything else that concerns them. Through these exercises, the therapist and client are able to deduce certain issues that need to be addressed.

“The fact is, the stories we tell others are extremely powerful. Some people tell stories about how bad things always happen to them – and their stories never change. Such people can find themselves caught in a vicious cycle of negativity.”

Ms Yang explains that by telling these stories during therapy, the client first gets to “externalise” the story for others to understand. Subsequently, the client is asked if he or she would like to make changes to the doll or the storybook. Ms Yang sometimes advises them to make “small changes” rather than big ones, because small changes may be easier to achieve, and can serve as first steps towards bigger breakthroughs.

“If you start to see outside of your usual

(4) Rachel Yang employs storytelling techniques in her art therapy sessions. (5 & 7) Ms Yang often gets her clients to make dolls and storybooks to help them examine their thoughts and feelings. (6) Martina Piscali was one of the featured storytellers at Storyfest 2019.

perspective, it can help you break out of the loop that you’ve been caught in, and gradually help you create a new narrative for your life,” she says. If doll-making and storybook-making seem like child’s play, it’s meant to be so. “Play can be a powerful element of therapy... When people have internalised pain, sometimes they don’t know where that pain is coming from. Play takes them back to that space in their childhood, and it might bring out some things that had happened to them.”

Ms Yang, who has counselled hundreds of people, recalled the case of one client with muscular dystrophy who was unable to speak after years of being left alone at home. But through therapy, he was able to talk again. “And now,” she says, “he gives public talks to raise awareness about muscular dystrophy, and also holds seminars with people with disabilities to give them courage and motivation.”

As he and Ms Yang both know, a good story has the power to change lives.



4



6



7