

Stories vs. Content: Why we need to recognize the difference

Confession time. I was a rabid listener of the podcast *Serial*, the joint effort between *This American Life* and public radio station WBEZ. (Full disclosure: When I'm not developing content strategies for law firms and legal marketers, I also produce a podcast for WBEZ called *PleasureTown*.) Hosted by veteran journalist and producer Sarah Koenig, *Serial* explores the criminal justice system through the legally murky case of Adnan Sayed, a Baltimore man convicted of murdering his high school girlfriend in 1999 when he was 17. For the last 15 years, Adnan has been serving out a life sentence for a crime he may or may not have committed.



Jaffe Staff

Told in episodic fashion from Sarah's vantage point, *Serial* is a riveting blend of documentary, true crime and memoir. The show also has been credited for ushering in [the golden age of podcasting](#) and igniting a [podcasting renaissance](#). It is the fastest-growing podcast in terms of listenership (*Serial* reportedly has registered more than 31 million downloads as of mid-December); it has dominated the iTunes podcasting charts; and it has even spawned successful [commentary podcasts](#).

But why am I talking about a podcast when this is a blog for lawyers and legal marketers? I mean, yes, *Serial* involves the criminal justice system, but the connection between the show's subject matter and your day-to-day job function may seem tenuous.

The reason I'm writing about *Serial* is because – like Netflix's on-demand original programming and BuzzFeed's endless supply of listicles – it is a disruptive gamechanger for content. And what's *Serial's* contribution to content marketing? It has put a spotlight on the immense power of storytelling.

Wait, But We Do Content Marketing!

Yes, many of you do *some* content marketing. Some of you might even do *a lot* of content marketing. You publish bylined articles. You post to social media. You might have even upped your efforts with a uniquely focused blog that provides updates on a niche area of law. But one thing legal content marketing still lacks, by and large, is storytelling.

We use the term quite liberally. "Let's tell our story" is a phrase I hear a lot. And I fully support the desire, but often that's where the effort stops – with the desire alone. Yes, let's tell your story! But why? And what do you want to say? And how do you want to say it? What impression do you want to leave? And whom do you want to impress it upon?

While we have been able to coast by using marketing buzzwords like "storytelling" for the past couple of years, the consuming public is getting wise to the game. They know good storytelling because we are experiencing a storytelling revival, thanks in part to podcasts

like *Serial*, cable dramas like *The Walking Dead* and the exponential popularity of the national storytelling scene with live shows like *The Moth*.

We need to start practicing what we preach and actually *do* storytelling.

OK, So What Is Storytelling?

There are many forms that storytelling can take, from the visual to the textual. Stories don't need words to be stories. They don't need sound or video either. (But video certainly is a great medium for storytelling.) What they do need are a few simple ingredients to actually qualify for story status.

- **Characters:** Whether implicit or explicit, a story needs characters. Maybe it's an attorney. Maybe it's a client. Maybe it's the firm itself. In any case, we need actors to have action. A story without any action, well, that's not a story I'd like to engage with, and neither will your audience. Bonus: It helps your efforts immensely if you have a protagonist (i.e., main character) with whom your target audience can identify.
- **Conflict:** Who likes conflict? People who read, view and engage with stories, that's who. A story without conflict is like watching people wait for a bus. It's boring. Conflict in terms of story is an implicit promise that something will happen. Without conflict, I as an audience member have no reason to follow you down your storytelling path.
- **Resolution:** Every story needs an ending. And sometimes it's a happy one. But let's not confuse resolution with a happy ending. In fact, some of the best stories – the ones we find most relatable – end on notes of ambivalence. The reason? Because they are honest. Your audience lives out stories every day. They know if your ending is genuine or not.

Neat – but How Do I Use Storytelling?

Great question, and one I'm glad you asked! And the truth is, we – and I'm speaking for legal marketers here – don't entirely know yet. I'm not saying we don't have ideas or that there haven't been good examples of storytelling in the legal space. What I mean is that your only limit is your imagination – as well as the level of willingness your firm management expresses when it comes to taking creative risks.

What I do know is that storytelling is an emotional tool. This makes it highly advantageous for every facet of legal marketing – from public relations to business development. For example, studies have shown that, when it comes to decision-making (including business decisions), emotion often trumps logic. What does this mean? It means you could be an underdog law firm battling a handful of stiff competition for a piece of business and win, in part, because you strategically found a way to appeal to your prospect's emotions. Or consider this: Let's say you want to enhance the public perception of your law firm and its brand. By finding quality stories to share, you can generate an actual emotional response from your audience, one that they will inevitably attribute to your brand. The end result? Increased brand awareness and brand equity.

While this might sound like science fiction or the stuff of self-help circles, it's really no different from the basic principles of effective advertising. It's just that traditional law firm

advertising doesn't work as well in our current high-tech, content-saturated world. You need to break through the noise, and you do that the way *Serial* did – by crafting a compelling story.

Storytelling – and successful content marketing in general – isn't just about what you say; it's how you say it.

What are your thoughts on how storytelling can be leveraged among legal marketers? Post a comment or contact Terry M. Isner at tisner@jaffepr.com.