

Trending: Why Storytelling Is the Hottest Legal Marketing Tactic

"For Sale: Baby shoes. Never worn."

Those six simple words, commonly attributed to Ernest Hemingway, represent a perfect narrative gestalt. Within that fragment lie hope, tragedy and a sense of moving on. It is an extreme but brilliant example of effective storytelling because it establishes all the foundational elements required of any coherent narrative, while satiating the reader's appetite for intrigue and drama. By its nature, it draws you in and leaves you demanding more – the exact desired effect of any quality piece of marketing content.

The legal industry is so rooted in the logical that you would think there is little need to appeal to the emotional. But the law's reliance on logic does not mean that the legal industry can succeed without pathos.

By its nature, law is a person-driven business. After all, we call it "professional services," because – unlike consumer product companies that manufacture widgets – the law is built on trusted relationships uniquely informed by the personality and skill sets of the individual professional. Likewise, the work being conducted as part of the attorney-client relationship is almost always person-centric, even if the parties involved are not actually individuals. For instance, while it is obvious that a personal injury case is centered around the injuries sustained by an individual, brokering a corporate merger is also a people-oriented transaction, since the results of the merger have a direct and serious impact on the owners, investors, customers and, of course, employees of the merged companies.

So, as much as we might want to dismiss emotion from the practice of law and the selling of legal services, emotion counts. But why is it so important? And just how can we, as practitioners and legal marketers, leverage the tenets of quality storytelling to further our business goals?

Listen, because I'm about to tell you a story.

Once Upon a Time...

We've all been there. You're at an industry event, perhaps a conference or day-long seminar, and you're sitting in some hotel meeting room with a lectern and a screen positioned near the front. The speaker is introduced, the lights dim and you feel a sense of dread as you realize that, for the next 45 to 60 minutes, you are to be held captive like a prisoner as a lecturer drolly recites line after line of his PowerPoint presentation. By the time you are released, you have a few pages of scribbled notes and a fragmented memory of the past hour of your life.



Jaffe Staff

The reason why this shared experience is so relatable is because, you are human, and humans are wired to react much more positively to information couched within story rather than information explained through bullet points and slides.

Evidence of this fact is “neural coupling.” Neural coupling is an automated function of the brain triggered by story that activates the parts of our anatomy that turn another person’s story into our own. In other words, when you use storytelling, your audience automatically puts themselves into your story. This is a characteristic of storytelling I often refer to as “WiFi of the mind,” because, in essence, you are transmitting ideas and experiences from one person to another.

Another science-based reason for storytelling’s effectiveness is that stories that incorporate emotion trigger a neurochemical response. When neurochemicals, such as dopamine, are released, your audience is more likely to recall your message and with greater accuracy.

To take advantage of our neurological relationship to storytelling, we must forgo the urge to explain in the emotionless PowerPoint style of communication. Rather, we must incorporate one of the tried-and-true tenets of creative writing into our own best practices: “Show, don’t tell.” What this means, in essence, is that your information will resonate more soundly with the audience if you execute explanation through narrative. It’s the difference between writing “Fred was happy” and “Fred skipped down the street and waved at every passerby with a smile so big that its sheer brilliance could have eclipsed a thousand suns.”

There Lived a Lawyer

I hear you. All of this information and science-based evidence about storytelling is fascinating, maybe even worthy of a Discovery Channel special or a spot on NPR. But how exactly can it be used to move a law firm closer to its strategic goals?

The fact is that storytelling should be treated as a foundational element of every component of the law firm sales cycle, from PR to marketing to business development. The following are some actual examples of how you can use storytelling to improve your current strategies.

Public Relations: The media loves a good story. It’s what they traffic in. The next time you have a lateral hire and are looking to get more coverage than just the typical “On the Move” sections, consider the story of the hire. What was his or her motivation for the job change? What attracted him or her to your firm? Why did he or she get into law in the first place? Perhaps it’s an individual who has overcome adversity to rise to a position of prominence? The more you can couch your news as a compelling story, the more the press will be inclined to pick up your announcement.

Marketing: Operating a niche blog is a great way to uniquely position a practice group or attorney. I have seen attorneys blog about everything from railroad law to food-labeling law. These efforts have positioned the authoring attorneys as qualified thought leaders and helped generate media attention. But not all blogs are created equal. The best are written with the reader in mind, and that means incorporating elements of story. So, rather

than write a dry post summarizing a recent court decision and the potential impact it might have on a segment of the industry, consider starting off by dramatizing the court case. Read the court documents and craft a story based on the conflict between the two parties. Breathe life into the case by paying attention to character and motivation, and illustrate the case's potential impact by providing hypothetical examples of what the changes to case law will actually look like in practice.

Business Development: Making a sale in the world of law is heavily contingent on selling yourself. As I already mentioned, this is a professional-service industry, so you are largely selling your own intellectual capital and capabilities. While you can certainly tell your prospects how great you are, this is an area where the phrase "Show, don't tell" really counts. The more you can illustrate your successes, core competencies and key differentiators through a story, even just a 30-second elevator pitch, the more the information will resonate with the audience and stick in their minds. Stop yourself from saying how great an attorney you are and instead provide an anecdote that reflects your greatness. Perhaps it was a big win that you achieved by overcoming tremendous challenges. Or maybe it was providing effective counsel to a client who had a limited budget. Whatever the kernel of the pitch is, it is important that you encase it in a narrative.

And They Lived Happily Ever After

As much hype as there is over the newness of storytelling, the truth is that none of this is new. Yes, it might be the hottest trend in marketing circles – legal or otherwise – but it's a tale as old as time, literally. Humankind has been creating stories before we even had language. It was an effective way to pass down information and influence behavior millennia ago, and it's still just as effective as ever.

But as marketers, we've lost our passion for story over the years, even as our audiences haven't. And some industries – particularly the legal sector – have historically been too conservative to incorporate bold storytelling into their arsenals of marketing tactics. While playing it safe might feel comfortable, that isn't a winning game plan. There will always be an innovative disrupter waiting in the shadows to execute the next great strategy and serve as the harbinger of a trend.

I urge practitioners and legal marketing staff to find ways to introduce elements of storytelling into your marketing and business development efforts. Start small. Experiment in ways that pose less risk to the overall image of the firm. And, if you see success, grow that initiative until it permeates every facet of your outreach efforts.

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