

It's the Story, Stupid

When it comes to effective communications, the story's the thing. But that thing is something that almost everyone forgets.

Some time ago we worked with executives from a company that makes very expensive, top-quality knives. They spent a lot of time talking about the tensile strength of the steel they use to make the blades – and the intricacies of their first-class manufacturing process.

But we didn't care.

After some discussion we asked them to tell us the single best story they could think of that demonstrated the quality and strength of their knives. One executive said that they had competed for a contract to supply the U.S. military with combat knives. The process was arduous and lengthy. One of the tests involved repeatedly dropping a 200-pound weight on the knife blade. All of their competitors' knives snapped after a few hits from the 200-pound jackhammer. Their blade withstood 100s of blows. In fact, the tester just gave up trying to break it.

They got the contract.

But they weren't using that story – and we still remember it two years later. It does more to illustrate the strength and quality of their product – and their brand – than anything they could have told us about their manufacturing process.

Stop and think. What's your best story? Do your executives and salespeople use it regularly and effectively? If not, why not?

A few weeks after talking to the knife company we worked with a company that makes environmentally friendly cleaning supplies. They dove into daunting detail on the formulas and processes they used – in contrast to a lot of other cleaning supply companies. They used words like "sustainability" to describe the environmentally safe benefits of the chemicals.

We didn't get it and still don't. Then they told us about the goldfish. Before they send out a batch of cleaning solution to customers they pour a pint of it in a jar and then drop a goldfish into the liquid. If the cleaner is safe enough for a goldfish to swim around in, it's probably pretty safe for the environment, too.

What a great story to illustrate the company's major point. What a great way to never have to say the word "sustainability."

Recently, we worked with a company that makes what's called "Flash" memory for USB drives, those little thumb-sized sticks you use to transfer information into or out of your computer.

Company executives extolled how tough and reliable the Flash memory drives were (unlike a regular computer drive, Flash memory has no moving parts). We didn't disbelieve them but again asked for their best story.

One sales executive said he had a stack of important documents backed up on his Flash drive – attached to his key chain. His computer crashed and, a little panicky, he searched for his Flash backup drive. He couldn't find it. Turns out his wife decided to wash his favorite jeans – and along with the jeans the Flash drive and key chain in the pocket.

Discovering this, the sales executive anxiously slid his Flash drive into the USB slot on his wife's computer.

And saw that all his important files had survived intact.

That's a great story to illustrate how Flash drives are tough and reliable.

Stories matter. A book called *The Leaders Voice* by Boyd Clarke talks about the “details, dialogue and drama” of storytelling. Those elements are important for one simple reason: it's what we remember from presentations and discussions.

So what are the best stories that illustrate the essential points of your business? Are you using them consistently?

If you're thinking that stories sound almost too trivial – that there's much more to effective communications than just stories - you're right. But never forget that stories are the fundamental building blocks of effective communications. Go find them and go use them – because they work.