

Email Storytelling Explained

Podcast interview between Rob Drummond and Jonathan Wilson

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Episode transcript:

Where To Tell Stories In Your Marketing

Stories are the best way to build trust with people over a long period of time. The most common email sequence where I'll work on with a client is the welcome series, after people first opt in.

In that series we'll try to tell the business owner's story, but in a way that presents them in a vulnerable way; that allows people to get to know the real them. It showcases their flaws as well. What I've found by doing this, is that the people who do engage with those emails do stick around for a long period of time.

It also means they actually see you as unique. So that even if they're not ready to buy right now, when they are ready to buy, they **ONLY** want to work with you.

I've had a long running interest in stories, ever since I studied English Literature for A-Levels at school. I had a bunch of friends who were studying things like physics and chemistry, and maths. So called "harder subjects", who laughed at me for doing an A-Level in reading books.

I knew that literature and stories were important. I just couldn't quite pinpoint yet what that thing was.

Later on, I realised the stories that we were studying were actually telling us fundamental truths about the human existence. They were trying to pass on knowledge. Stories are the oldest way of passing on **knowledge** - and I had a sense of that, without really understanding it.

If you're building trust with people in your marketing, you're doing the same thing. You're trying to pass on knowledge. Most people when they try to pass on that knowledge, write dry content-heavy emails.

Stories vs Content

I distinguish in an email between story and content.

Content is the email that you would've sent if you didn't include any story at all. It's the information we assume people want, by catering to their logical brains. But it's not really how they make buying decisions.

If you think of a sandwich, the filling is like the story. There's all sorts of fillings that you can put on a sandwich. Tasty fillings, varied fillings, all of that stuff.

The content is like the bread. If you don't have any filling on your sandwich, you're asking people to eat dry bread over and over. Potential customers might eat dry bread a few times, if they're really desperate to work with you. It can work, but it's working less and less.

If you have a potentially long buying cycle, or if you sell to the same person over a long period of time, potentially over multiple transactions, then storytelling isn't something to bolt onto your marketing. Rather, your story needs to sit at the heart of your marketing.

How My Storytelling Process Developed...

I started off my self-employed career as an AdWords consultant, and I ended up doing some copywriting work in the email marketing system AWeber. So, I was writing emails for myself and for clients.

I've always written story based emails, and I always assumed that storytelling was a bit of a dark art and that I couldn't really create a system for it. I've always created systems for Google ads and things like that, but I thought I couldn't create a system for how to write a story based email.

And then, a few years ago, I went to one of Sean D'Souza's workshops. Sean is a marketer based in New Zealand, and he put on a storytelling workshop. There were about 20 of us at the workshop, and we all arrived as writers of some sort. A few copywriters, a few authors, and a few other people. It became quickly apparent that Sean *did* have a process he was able to teach, and it wouldn't have mattered if we'd all have arrived as architects, or engineers. We would all have made the same mistakes, and we would have all emerged out of the course with the same skills.

That changed my entire thinking, because I realized that by applying some of Sean's ideas and combining them with some of my own ideas, I was able to systematize storytelling and I was able to teach it.

That isn't to say it's an easy system to follow, and the hardest part about it is being willing to be vulnerable. That's probably the hardest thing that people wrestle with. You worry when you tell a personal story that it's not gonna be relevant to the buyer; that people are going to judge you; that's going to distract them from buying.

All of these things are only true in very specific circumstances. These things are only true if someone is literally ready to click the 'Buy Now' button. If they're not ready to click the 'Buy Now' button, then you need to be telling your story. And the more vulnerable you can be about it, the better.

I (Jonathan) think you're honestly right, I think that's probably the thing that concerns or worries people the most about telling their story. At the same time, this is kind of similar to our episode describing email list maintenance hygiene. You want people to see your angle and approach. If your approach isn't for them, it'd be better for them to see that and unsubscribe, in the storytelling phase, rather than actually become a nightmare client.

If people don't gel with your values it's best they find that out early on and unsubscribe. Then the people who DO like it, who ARE interested and find it intriguing can soak it up and get to know you better.

Hidden Common Ground

People always see more commonalities in your story than you realize that they're going to. These are shared experiences, even if it's not exactly the same experience.

My first email in my welcome series goes back to my earliest memory. One of my earliest significant memories is of my Grandad dying ... and I was there in the room. I was about four years old and I remember it happening, but I wasn't old enough to understand it properly.

It's just quite a powerful story if you can introduce that sort of thing, because people always relate to that in some other context. It always triggers off some kind of association.

I have quite a few emails in my series that talk about early jobs. I think most of us have all had early jobs that we wouldn't necessarily do anymore, and the stories that come out of that are things you can relate to.

I have stories that I tell about truanting off school to play snooker, which actually ties into what I am today. I still maintain that a degree of walking around and avoiding work is actually healthy for you as a writer, and healthy for your soul and healthy for a sense of independence. So it does tie in, if you can see the connection.

Some people reading that story might have had 100% attendance rates at school, but I think we've normally done some slightly shady things in our past, and that's the hidden common ground. It starts to showcase more of the real you, and that's the foundation of how we build trust.

How Many Emails In Your Welcome Series?

If I'm working with a client, I normally aim to write 14 or 15 emails in the introduction series. My own email series has 18 emails, because sometimes sometimes when you write a story-based email you realize it needs to be split into two parts. Maybe it contains two stories, or a fragmented story that is best split up. If you end up with an email that's got two stories you always have to split them.

I like aiming for 15 emails, because it means I have different implementation options. I can send an email a day, for just over two weeks. I can send an email every other day for a month. I can send an email every weekday for three weeks or so. Within the time-frame of a month I can tell my story in a way that actually communicates my expertise and gets people to see my uniqueness, and gets people to understand my real value.

I don't generally have series that run on longer than a month, because people kind of forget where you've started with it. So I feel like a month is like a nice maximum time-frame to wrap it up.

It might be that you have multiple versions of these story sequences. It might be that you have a series after people opt-in, and then maybe you have another one that goes out a few weeks later, or a few months later even.

The other reason that I like writing 14 or 15 emails, is I can write five emails in about half a day, as long as I'm focused and I'm not messing about on Facebook. So, really, it's three lots of production for me, which feels more doable.

Telling Your Own Story Is Harder

Something important I've found is that it's way easier for me to tell someone else's story, than it is to tell my own.

It's harder to work on your own story. Last year I decided to rewrite my core story series. Where I might write five emails in a day for a client, then that would drop to one or two for me.

It's worth appreciating that your story is quite a complicated thing. It's not tangible, or black and white. It's almost like a very complicated octopus that has different tentacles; different things that you might include, that you might not include. There's no linear path through it. There's different branches to it, certainly. There's different things that you might say.

There isn't really a correct way to tell it even. Often the best way to tell it is to think through the main turning points. To ask: what are the most significant experiences that led you to a different trajectory? Even though those turning points often aren't that significant at the time... connections, chance occurrences and so on at the time. Often we just kind of fall into things.

Story Selection

There's this idea that story selection is critically important, but I don't actually think it is. I think an ability to make the story of some relevance to the reader is important. If you think about my sandwich analogy we were talking about earlier, where you've got your story being filling and your bread being the content, then you need to be able to link the story to the content. It can't be a jarring switch between the two, and there's a bit of finesse involved in that.

The way to do it is to end story on one idea and start the content on the same idea. But what you find over time is that story selection actually isn't so important after all. Selecting vulnerable stories is important. But the more vulnerable the story is the harder it'll be to tell, and the more you'll second guess yourself and almost talk yourself out of including it. Those are normally the most powerful emails, and the ones that would build the most trust.

If you think about what all your competitors are sending out, they are not putting their inner selves on the line like this. When you tell these stories, you are doing a very brave thing. You need to acknowledge and accept that it's hard, and accept that you can only tell the stories that you're ready to tell. Not all of your stories are ready to tell, or maybe even will ever be ready to tell, and that's fine. You can only tell stories that you're comfortable with. The more you get used to telling the stories, the more comfortable it becomes.

Open vs Closed Sandwich Format

When I'm creating a story-based email I distinguish between the open sandwich format and the closed sandwich format.

The open sandwich just goes from filling to bread. From story to content. You launch straight into the drama of the story, you pull a reader in and then you transition to your content. That tends to work best with people who already know you quite well.

When people have only just opted in, you might want to adopt the closed sandwich format instead. In the closed sandwich structure you have a sentence or two of content at the top, that gives the reader a clue as to where you're going with this.

For example you could write an email which opens:

"I need to tell you about a time that I accidentally halved my Cost Per Conversion on Google Ads. This is how it came about..."

And then you go into the story, but you've given me a clue as to where you're going with it. If people don't have the relationship with you yet, sometimes you need to drop that seed at the start to get them to read the story.

It's the story that builds the trust, but that only happens if they read the story in the first place.

Don't Be Hard On Yourself... Or Your Stories

It's easy to be a bit hard on yourself and your stories. If you write a story and you don't think it's much good; you're worried about the relevancy of it then that's basically a normal response. I see a lot of interest in the

marketing world in storytelling, but as a fad or technique for getting attention. I'm not really talking about it in that sense, I'm talking about it as a fundamental technique for delivering **knowledge**.

I'm talking about stories on a much deeper level. If you sell based on your expertise then you can try and convince people with logic, but they're not likely to buy. You can only build trust and get people to have a sales conversation with you based on emotion, and emotion is all about stories.

At the same time, storytelling is a rewarding thing to do. The most enjoyable part of my work is either working on my own story, or better understanding my own story - because I'm always learning about myself. I have this perception of how my story is in my head, which occasionally is in flux. If you can learn more about yourself then you'll write better emails overall. Having a solid grasp of who you are and where you come from, and what your values are is only going to help.

Facebook Ad Stories

We've touched on this in a previous episode, about people telling personal stories in Facebook ads as an attention grabbing gimmick. Which underscores something we've mentioned a number of times, which is that there's a sequence to all these things right. Telling stories in WARM Facebook ads, where you're targeting a remarketing audience makes a lot of sense to me.

Opening up and telling your story unsolicited to cold people who don't know who you are, basically makes you like the crazy person on the bus, who sidles up to you and insists on telling you their life story. You're like, *"oh my God, how am I gonna get away from this person?"* So, don't be like that person.

Start Where You're Comfortable

If you're just getting to grips with this, then telling deeply personal stories is quite advanced. It's often easier to just get going by telling stories about the more direct line of events that led to your current expertise, and your current line of work.

That's a relatively safe way to get started. It's not that much of a leap between that sort of story and your content. So, if that helps you get going, or if that's what you first introduce to the people coming into your world, then do that. Your story will evolve over time and as you tell it more, it'll become clearer to you.

Include Ups and Downs...

Most business stories are dull because not enough bad things happen. A good story has ups and downs, and that is the contrast in the story. You need both ups and downs. Most business stories just have ups. If you're only telling sweet and joyful, wonderful things to your customers, then you're basically treating them like children.

Let's say you were out in your yard getting the mail. A ball bounces over the fence and into the road. A small toddler runs out after the ball, oblivious to the van speeding at the top of the road. What sort of message do you shout? It's not a positive, joyful message! It's a negative message, because you're looking after people and need someone's attention.

So don't be afraid of using negative messaging. Most of the time you're not being negative, you're just being responsible.

If your stories are only just all the wonderful things that happen to you, then first of all that's really dull. People are not interested in that. People watch television programs for the drama, for the pain, for the heartache. People want to read about your heartache, because they see echoes of their own heartache echoed in that.

Keep Them Reading...

It can work really well to include suspense and dialogue. Suspense and dialogue are quite often missing. Suspense is basically withholding the outcome of the story.

Another common mistake I see people making is commenting, or reading in between the lines of the story as it's being told. Or interpreting the story for me as a reader. It's like, oh, well that was dangerous because, blah, blah, blah. Let the reader come to their own conclusions.

Suspense works well to keep attention. One idea is to tell half of the story and I'll leave it on a cliffhanger, and I'll continue that story in the next email. So, that's sometimes called a soap opera sequence.

I do not make significant use of soap opera sequences, because I generally believe that each email should stand on its own two legs. However, at the start of an email series it can make sense to split a story across two, maybe three emails. You want to draw people in and you want to get people reading. It's like the Netflix effect. If you can get people reading the first three emails, they'll probably read the next 15.

Netflix do that. If you watch the first three or four episodes in a series on Netflix, Netflix know that you'll probably watch the full box set. It's the same with email. Early consumption matters a lot.

Don't take the readers' attention for granted basically. Don't tell boring stories that only have wonderful things happen. Try to withhold the outcome a bit. Make use of dialogue. Most novels contain significant dialogue, because dialogue pulls you into the story rather than telling you what happened in the story. So including dialogue in your emails is a sensible thing to do. It doesn't have to be all dialogue, but occasional bits of dialogue really just help to keep the reader engaged.

Grab Rob's Simple Story Selling Book

I've actually written a book about this called, [Simple Story Selling](#), which goes through all of my thoughts on this, in a lot more detail.

The other thing that I did in *Simple Story Selling* was to add in lessons from great literature. After I went through Sean D'Souza's storytelling course and I'd been working on this for a while, a friend recommended that I read a book called *The Seven Basic Plots*, Christopher Booker.

I'd sort of heard various opinions that there are X number of basic plots, and all plots evolve around the so-called hero's journey. I'd always dismissed it as a myth of categorization.

Over about 900 pages, Booker analyses all of the stories that have **lasted** over the last 2,000 years or so. Going right back to the Epic of Gilgamesh, and I'm coming right up to modern day. He concludes that the stories that last all tend to follow the same plot structure, which broadly speaking is the hero's journey. You have the call in the beginning, you then have a, sort of, dream phase where things go well for a while.

So, think about *Lord of the Rings* for a moment. In the call phase, Dark Riders arrive in the Shire and it's not possible for the Hobbits to carry on living peacefully. So that is the call. We then have a dream phase, where

they make pretty good progress for a while. We then have the frustration phase, where they get all sorts of hold ups and they get split up, and they have to go through a mine. There's then the final, climatic battle with the Dark Force in the story. Then there's the resolution. All of the stories that last tend to follow this plot structure.

Even in a comedy plot where the Dark Force in this story is confusion. You have the same sort of thing where like, the resolution is people finally seeing each other for who they really are and then you get the happy ending.

Or in a tragedy plot it's the same structure, only the Dark Force in the story is also the hero of the story. So, in *Macbeth* for example, in the final stage the Kingdom of Scotland returns to its state of parity. So, it's the same plot structure, just told in different ways from different perspectives.

So, in the first version of Simple Story Selling I wanted to know: could I apply the different variations of that structure work in a single email? And the answer was that was "yes", but it felt a bit squished. It felt like you were trying to condense a nuanced five phase story into say 800 words.

So, when I'm now constructing my core story series, I normally have that structure in the back of my mind. For example I was telling a story about how I got to my current line of work, maybe the core phase is that I was bored in a job... I felt like I needed a change. I decided to go self-employed.

For a while I had the dream phase where things went quite well. I managed to pick up clients. Then, the wheels feel off the bus, and it all went horribly wrong. I ended up walking around shops trying to speak to business owners in desperation (the frustration phase). The fourth phase would be the climatic point of resolution, which could've been me going to Sean D'Souza's storytelling workshop for example. Then you have the resolution of how it currently is today.

If I was telling that story I would try to fit it over 15 emails, but that five stage structure gives it an evergreen quality.

But, anyway, that's more advanced stuff. It's not stuff that has to be considered up front. We're all natural storytellers, and there's this perception that it's more complicated than it necessarily needs to be. And like anything, it can be quite complicated. If you want to discuss archetypal stories with me we can go into all of that - I love talking about all of that stuff.

But the most important thing is just to **get going**. Whatever story you can tell today is better than not telling a story at all. That's better than just giving people dry bread over and over.

So my book is called Simple Story Selling, so I would urge everyone to go and grab a copy. It's on Amazon on paperback and Kindle.

Look for the Emotional Wound...

We all have some kind of emotional wound, whether we like it or admit it or not. That emotional wound is a huge source of vulnerability, if you can find the strength to write about it. Sometimes the emotional wound is an obvious thing like the death of a parent, or some kind of tragic event like that.

I had a fairly 'regular' upbringing, where nothing bad happened like that. But the wound is still there.

I've come to the assessment that my emotional wound happened when I was about 13. I stammered badly in a French class and it completely knocked the stuffing out of me. For a while, I completely shut down at

school. I stopped participating. About a year after that happened, I managed to slip up because I was nominated for a school elocution competition. In my head I was like, if you'll excuse my language for a minute, "shit, shit, shit, shit!". That was what was going in my head. I was like, "*how do I get out of this?*"

Wrongly, I decided to just hide out on the yard and not show up basically. Which was the immature way to go about it. I should've told someone that I was struggling and that I needed help, but I didn't have that level of maturity to deal with it in that way.

But it took me a long time and it plagued me for a long time. And still does occasionally, but I've learnt to deal with it and own it.

If you can have the bravery to address your emotional wounds (there can be more than one), then that does create a powerful, compelling story. We're all messed up in some way, and it's the ways that we're messed up that offer the greatest possible empathy connection with other people, if you're brave enough to tell people about it. When they're engaged and ready to hear it.

To read more please order your copy of [Simple Story Selling](#) from Amazon