

The Art of Communication Persuasion Through Story Telling

By Jay Sullivan

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As lawyers, we routinely need to persuade others. We need them to hire us, to find in favor of our clients, to work for us, to promote us to partner. In order to persuade others we must tell engaging stories about how we can help them.

We don't sell widgets. We don't have something we can hold up and say, "This is what I'm talking about." We sell concepts, and most people cannot learn a concept in the abstract. We can only process an idea by its impact on reality.

Law school is all about concepts, and law students are generally a fairly bright bunch. Yet for generations, law school has been driven by the case method of instruction. The cases are the stories that make the concepts easy for us to understand. Lawyers must tell stories about the concepts we are trying to "sell" in order for our audience to understand what we want them to do. We need to be good story tellers to be persuasive.

Many attorneys rely too heavily on the prestige of their firms or their own good names to help them win business. Our firm may get us a meeting with a prospective client, but rarely does it win business. Most prospective clients are not impressed when an attorney says, "Hire us. We're the biggest and the best." That type of pitch is not successful because every firm says, "We're the biggest and the best." They just qualify their statement differently. "We're the biggest and the best at M&A for telecom companies in the northeast," for example.

You are more likely to win business if you can tell a story that relates your ability to the needs the client has expressed. "It's really interesting that you are facing that challenge. About six months ago, Acme, down the street, was facing a similar challenge. Because we have lawyers who could handle the tax, real estate and the regulatory issues involved, we were able to help them address their challenges and close their deal on time." Now the potential client is thinking, "Well you could do this for me because you just did it for someone else." The story carries the message better. "Hire us because of who we are," isn't as strong as "Hire us because of what we've done."

To tell a good story, begin by defining your purpose. Is your story to convey a specific point or to establish rapport? If you are trying to convey a specific point, your story must have a clear message. State the message clearly at the end of the story, the way Aesop's fables end with "and the morale of the story is..." Just don't use that phrase; it sounds contrived.

If your story is to build rapport, consider your audience. To connect with a group, make sure the members have a common knowledge base to appreciate the story. (Don't tell a story about a complex legal issue to an audience of non-lawyers.) If your audience is just one person, make sure she can identify with the nature of your story. (Don't tell stories about your kids to someone who doesn't have kids, or stories about your litigation successes to someone interested in hiring your firm for its transaction experience.)

Then consider your use of humor. Humor is a delicate issue. I was once teaching a presentation skills class to a group of partners at a large law firm. During a break, one partner approached me and, chuckling to himself, said, "I was thinking of being a little jocular in my next presentation. What are your thoughts on that?" The only thought in my head was, "Please don't!"

Using humor when giving a presentation is like the price of diamonds. If you have to ask, you can't afford it. If you have to "think" about being funny, it doesn't come natural, so don't go near it.

Audiences don't "take points off" your presentation for having a straightforward delivery. They do deduct points if you try to be funny and fail.

Following are a few quick tips to persuade your listener:

- **Be upbeat.** Your story should address how your audience can address their problems. Make yourself the hero in a subtle, non-bragging way. Then tie the story directly to the needs your audience has expressed.
- **Keep it clean.** If any part of your brain is questioning whether the story is too risqué, off color or of questionable taste, skip it. You don't want to risk offending your audience.
- **Be brief.** Your stories should focus on the specific point you want to make. Eliminate extraneous parts of the story line since they only get in the way of someone understanding your content.
- **Don't go negative.** Whether you are trying to win over a new client or convince the promotion committee to make you a partner, talk about what you offer. Don't knock the competition. Whenever you are communicating, you are positioning yourself as a leader. Leaders focus on the positive.
- **Memorize your first line.** This will help get you off to a smooth start, as memorizing your last line will help you wrap up. All good stories start the same way, "Once upon a time." The time reference gives the story context: Two weeks ago....; When I started at the firm....; The last time I argued before the appellate division.... If you know your opening line, your story will have more structure.

And all good stories end the same, "They all lived happily ever after." The last line reinforces your message: That's why we know we can help you with this problem; That's how I see myself adding value to the partnership; That's why I recommend we take this approach with the litigation. The last line drives home your point.

- **Avoid metaphors.** Your story is itself a metaphor for how you can help your audience. Tell your story clearly, without literary flourishes. In working with different groups over the years, I have heard many metaphors that worked well, and many that didn't. One pharmaceutical company piloted the tag line for their new flu medicine with the lines: "If you have a cold, we'll help you kick it. If you have a runny nose, we'll help you lick it." It created the wrong image for people. Another client mixed her metaphors: "I know if we develop the right roots in the community we can soar like eagles." It created the impression she had her feet on the ground, head in the clouds. My personal favorite however, was the young idealist who built a presentation around the line, "Let's take a stab at peace."

Metaphors are powerful tools and have their place when you are writing a closing argument or trying to convey your message. If your message is, "We can help you avoid the potholes in developing your new business," that's great. Now your story can reinforce how you will accomplish that goal. If you then develop other metaphors within your story, you will confuse the issue.

Honing your storytelling skills will help you persuade your listeners in a variety of contexts. Our stories help establish our credibility as well as make our content more memorable. Remember the old adage: "Tell me a fact and I'll listen. Tell me the truth and I'll believe. Tell me a story and it will be with me forever."

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