

## Engage Your Audience with S'More Stories

You can't always find yourself around a crackling campfire, toasting s'mores at twilight with fireflies twinkling just at the edge of the trees, to hear a good story. There are times when whiteboards, fluorescent lights and computer-festooned desks just have to do to create atmosphere conducive to storytelling. That's OK, because if you have the right tools at hand, stories in a business setting can be just the thing to help teams make better decisions or convey goals to upper management.

According to the webinar, *The Art (& Science) of Business Storytelling*, offered by the Association for Financial Professionals and presented by John Sanchez, managing director of the FPA Group, stories help get your point across and assist in memory retention. "Storytelling is an extremely effective way to get your audience to engage with, remember and act on your message," Sanchez said.

Only 5% of people can remember individual statistics, but one is 22 times more likely to remember something if it is presented in a story. Storytelling involves both left and right sides of the brain, prompting engagement and focus. In fact, stories help our brains to produce cortisol, which helps in focusing. The way you present making a decision can be helped by storytelling. Positive associations can be created with decision-making in this way, since storytelling also triggers production of oxytocin and dopamine in the brain.

There are seven main components to a story, Sanchez said. First is "Why?" Each story needs a purpose, a reason for being. Why are you telling it? It can't be an effective story without a purpose.

Next is a main point or goal, as well as stakeholders, the people who have a vested interest in the outcome of the story. Another element is a champion, who helps to push through another element: obstacles. Without obstacles to overcome, there is no story. Effective stories also contain moments of change. And, finally, conflict is the point at which the champion overcomes or is defeated by the obstacles.

Sanchez presented his Platinum Rule, to go side by side with the Golden Rule. The Platinum Rule states: Don't give people what you want; give people what *they* want. To do so, you must understand your audience. You need to tailor your story to fit your audience in order for it to be effective. You can ask questions of your audience to gather information.

Experience level is one characteristic of your audience that it is valuable to learn. For some, going over basics might be a waste of time if they are already experienced in their fields. Familiarity is another aspect. The more shared experiences, the more familiar your audience is with each other and you may need to speak differently with them.

Is your audience required to hear you speak, or did they pay for your presentation? This will have an effect on how hard you may have to work to engage their interest.

Prior knowledge and open-mindedness are other factors to consider when addressing your audience, as well as the different ways in which people process information. Are they left-brain logical or right-brain

creative? Finally, the diversity of a group needs to be taken into consideration to properly tailor your presentation, Sanchez said.

The next time you need to propose a project to the IT department and explain why certain software needs to be used, or convince the CFO of a different way of doing things, or make recommendations to a set of department heads, try presenting within the context of a story. It just might make decision-making easier and your ideas more memorable.

Of course, s'mores are optional.

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