

Who's telling stories?

An IABC survey shows that communicators are using storytelling in their work, but obstacles remain

by Angelo Ioffreda and Terrence Gargiulo



When the Sodexo Foundation, the charitable arm of Sodexo Inc., sought to boost employee participation in payroll contributions last year, it turned to storytelling. The foundation included an insert with paychecks that included the stories of beneficiaries of the foundation's programs as a call to action. One such story was Toni's:

Being a single mom of six children makes it very hard for me to live out my own dreams. After graduating from the Sodexo Foundation-sponsored Community Kitchen, I am now able to fulfill a long-overdue wish to start a career in the culinary field. Now that I am a supervisor cook for Sodexo, I am able to provide leadership and service in the company and in my community. It is very empowering!

It's all about connecting people

Best-practice organizations use stories to drive their business results. Stories help convey important information about the business and drive the organization's narrative about its mission, values and brand. They also serve to connect people to one another, within the organization, with customers, and with a larger community, especially in the case of volunteer or cause-related organizations. In doing so, they also facilitate knowledge sharing. Here are two examples:

Marriott International weaves together the story of the company's founding by the Marriott family and a culture that celebrates outstanding hospitality service. Its J. Willard Marriott Award of Excellence recognizes 10 of the company's most outstanding associates who exemplify a commitment to excellence, teamwork and the "spirit to serve." The honorees receive wide internal and external coverage in a variety of media.

Founded by seven-time Tour de France winner Lance Armstrong, who overcame testicular cancer, the **Lance Armstrong Foundation** is dedicated to educating people about cancer and mobilizing resources to combat the disease. Encouraging survivors to "Live Strong," the LAF web site invites people to share their "Survivorship Stories," offering inspiration and hope to others.

—A.I. & T.G.

Using stories like Toni's in the annual payroll drive was new, and the results were dramatic: an impressive 100 percent jump in participation and a 116 percent increase in annualized contributions over a similar, non-story-based campaign two years earlier.

"A story-based appeal made all the difference," says Shondra Jenkins, a community relations manager who ran the campaign. "The personal stories moved employees to action." Toni's story was also featured earlier in the year at the foundation's annual fundraising dinner, which honors Sodexo's "Heroes of Everyday Life," as well as in the company's magazine.

Perhaps you are one of the many communication professionals who, like Sodexo's, are already using stories. Maybe you would like to do more with stories. Or maybe time or other obstacles prevent you from fully leveraging stories as one of the most effective tools in your

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communication toolbox. You're not alone. Respondents to an IABC survey on storytelling paint a positive but challenging picture of working with stories.

Why stories?

As communicators, we look for the most effective ways of reaching our audiences. Traditional forms of communication, such as PowerPoint presentations, newsletters and memos, present information in a direct, linear fashion, and are structured to leave as little as possible to interpretation. One survey respondent put it this way: "We tend to rely more on presenting facts and statistics instead of creating an emotional connection with our audiences. Some in management are more comfortable with the 'facts and stats' approach."

Stories package information in a compelling and memorable way. Story-based communications are more emotional in nature and less neatly struc-

tured. They connect with people in a more visceral way because they trigger the listener's own experiences and personal associations.

In the December 2006 survey of IABC members worldwide, 345 members representing a broad range of levels and organizations responded, making this one of the most comprehensive surveys on storytelling to date. The results enhance our understanding of how storytelling is being used and point the way to more effective approaches.

The good news is that many communicators are already using stories successfully, and 48.7 percent give their CEOs high marks as effective storytellers. Respondents indicated a wide range of uses for stories in their organizations, from town hall meetings, to sales and marketing, to training, to reinforcing values and change management. In our view, there are six broad areas of organizational

storytelling, each encompassing multiple subjects to which storytelling can be applied:

- Stories about the organization, including its "creation" story
- Stories about its products and services
- Stories about its business performance (on both a macro and micro level)
- Stories about its people
- Stories about its culture
- Personal narratives, including stories about an individual's department or role

The bad news is that while more than two-thirds (67.9 percent) believe that stories could play a "very important" or "somewhat important" role in their organization's communication strategies, only 32.5 percent believe that their senior leadership makes effective use of stories. Professional communicators see the potential of leveraging the storytelling skills of their leaders, and their disappoint-

Story strategies: How to weave narratives into your communications

The most difficult part of introducing storytelling approaches to your organization is getting started. You don't need to begin at the top with your CEO, although it certainly helps if you can. Here are some tips for getting the ball rolling.

Start small. Introduce storytelling in small doses and assess the reaction. Share a story about the founding of your organization. Present it in the context of your organization's enduring values, mission or current challenges. The positive response you'll get will give you permission to do more.

Repackage existing information in a story format. Pull together comments from your customers and then develop a narrative

about what all these comments say about your organization's customer service. This is sure to get senior management's attention.

Find a champion. It takes only one person to help you take that first step. For example, at a town hall meeting, encourage presenters to share a personal story about why they joined the organization, employees who made an impression on them or what they are most proud of. Invite members of the audience to share their own stories.

Experiment. Take a modest risk to elicit and share stories. Contests, short interviews and polls are a great way to get started at a low cost because they offer a way to report back in narrative form. Why do you like working here? Tell me about your best day at work.

What do you like doing in your free time?

Interview people. This is one of the easiest things to do. You can interview senior leaders or everyday employees. You can do this in writing, live or on videotape. Probe not only for what they do at work but what they're passionate about and what they do in their free time. It makes people more real and thus more interesting to your audiences.

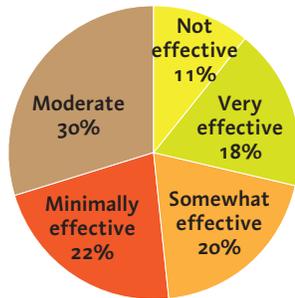
Keep it simple. In a business setting, storytelling is not about spinning a great yarn. Rather, it needs to be compact. How does it advance my organization's narrative or foster connections? Focus on "What is the story?" and "Why should I as a listener care?"

—A.I. & T.G.

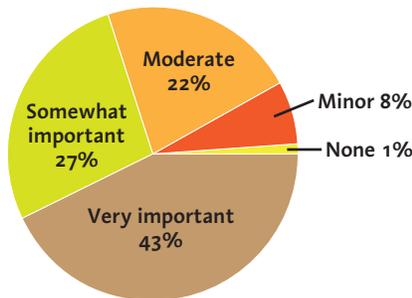
Survey of communicators yields telling results

The results of the December 2006 survey of IABC members worldwide indicate that while many communicators are using stories in their organizations, they also see room for improvement in how stories are used.

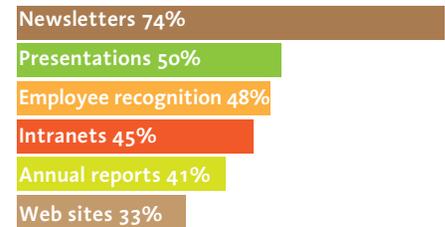
How effective is your organization in using stories?



What role can stories play in your communication strategies?



How are you using stories in your organization?



DUE TO ROUNDING, TOTALS MAY NOT EQUAL 100 PERCENT.

ment at not being able to do more was reflected in the qualitative data from the survey.

Obstacles abound

Communicators identified several obstacles to the greater use of storytelling in their organizations. Far and away the most cited obstacle was the time and resources to collect and package the stories. “Time is usually the biggest obstacle,” said one respondent. “Everyone wants to get to the bottom line right away without hearing the story or reasoning for ideas. It takes time to spot a story, draw it out, refine it for best impact.... Often we just don’t have time (or we don’t make it).”

Respondents noted the difficulty and frustration in gathering stories, especially in large organizations, and then finding ways to use them. Having found suitable stories, some cited the difficulty in obtaining clearance from the legal department or getting permission from customers and partners to use them. “There are a lot of approvals and sign-offs required to tell a story,” said one frus-

trated communicator.

Another set of obstacles has to do with organizational culture. Forty percent of respondents said they did not have a culture of storytelling in their organization. Several said there is a bias in their organizations for quantitative information. “In a business environment, stories are written off as ‘fluff,’” said one. “Storytelling [is] not seen as serious communications.” Some respondents described this resistance as an unwillingness “to be creative and accept new ways of communicating information.” Another lamented, “The communications department here is used to corporate-speak rather than storytelling.”

Senior leaders were also perceived as potential obstacles. Reflecting the general mood on this score, one said, “I think the main obstacle is that most executives just don’t understand how storytelling can make them more effective.” Respondents cited “senior leadership’s poor communication skills,” “lack of interest generally in effective communications at the top” and “leadership’s fear of being too

‘informal’ and not using a corporate language.” One communicator wrote: “I would predict that if I approached the senior management team suggesting that perhaps storytelling would be more effective, I’d receive several blank stares.”

Engaging others

What the survey did not reveal in detail was the extent to which communicators are using stories to foster greater interaction within their organizations. The focus for the communicator is typically on telling the story—gathering, writing, polishing and deploying it.

But storytelling is more than that. It is also about listening, sharing and engaging employees, customers and stakeholders. A challenge is eliciting and gathering those stories to add to the organization’s collective narrative. This is where storytelling consultants, who approach narrative from an organizational-development perspective, can sometimes help communicators plumb their organizations with a deeper and richer approach to storytelling. •

about the authors

Angelo Ioffreda is a member of IABC’s Washington, D.C., chapter and vice president for internal communication at Sodexo Inc., a provider of integrated food and facilities management in North America. Terrence Gargiulo, president of makingstories.net, is an international consultant, speaker and author. He is a recent recipient of the HR Leadership Award from the Asia Pacific HRM Congress.