

Stories make presentations come alive

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From September through January, the TVs at our house are set on NFL football. I am not the fan my husband is. He's the one who yelps, screams and pounds pillows while watching. But I am fascinated by the stories behind the games.

An example:

After the first round of the playoffs, the Washington Redskins returned home with their four-game winning streak over, along with their campaign to win for the late Sean Taylor, who died Nov. 27 after being shot by an intruder at his home.

But that playoff contest was quite a game -- and quite a story.

In the third quarter, it appeared the underdog Redskins might actually defeat the Seattle Seahawks.

There was an interception by LaRon Landry, who had taken over at free safety after Taylor's death, to set up a touchdown that gave Washington a 14-13 lead. The announcers went into an emotional pitch as they exclaimed that Sean Taylor was with his teammates that night.

We make sense of life and understand the world through stories. The story about Sean Taylor and his teammates not only captured the attention of Redskins fans. It also created a relationship with a much larger audience that began pulling for the team.

Stories about Green Bay Packers quarterback Brett Favre, for example, have done the same thing for that team.

There are a million presentations going on at this very moment, and most of them are not taking advantage of the power of storytelling.

Most of them are being given by individuals who approach a presentation as one-way communication -- a data dump.

They think it's up to them to "make" a presentation and push it toward the audience. To top it off, they display their entire script on crowded slides.

That kind of presentation makes listeners feel as though all the thinking has been done for them. There's no place for inspiration, and no way to participate in the development of an idea.

But when a speaker steps in front of us and begins to tell a story, our imagination kicks in.

Unscripted storytelling releases the speaker to be natural and conversational. Those of us in the audience can be involved in the moment. The stories help create new meaning and relevance.

Storytelling is a language stronger than words because stories are metaphors for our own lives.

The next time you speak, use a story from your own life and create new relevance by letting it make a point about your topic.

Here are some examples to consider:

- A tough obstacle you had to overcome and how that experience affects your work.
- Some of the best advice you ever received and why it's relevant to your topic.
- An experience that shaped your philosophy and how it shows up in your business.
- Something you had to learn the hard way and the upside of that lesson today.

Authentic communicators earn the trust of listeners by telling stories and building genuine relationships -- versus networking and making pitches.

Your stories and your ability to create meaning are the very things your audience can't get anywhere else.

Don't hold out.

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