

How to Use Stories in Your Keynote

Effective stories are key to your success. Research shows the human brain is wired for stories. Stories also have a greater impact on us (our audiences) than statistics, facts, and figures. Stories will make your facts and figures more persuasive. A good story makes your ideas more interesting and your presentation more entertaining. And today's audiences expect to be entertained!

Storytelling is a powerful tool for engaging your audience emotionally and intellectually. Share personal stories, experiences, or anecdotes that relate to your topic. Use vivid language, descriptive details, and a conversational tone to transport your audience into the world of your narrative. This storytelling approach helps create a deeper connection and makes your content more relatable.

I always encourage authors to share a story with the audience. It creates an intimate experience that attendees enjoy and makes your presentation memorable. It also leads to more book sales.

In Part One I share a popular story I used in my keynotes. Part Two is a 'Guide to Developing Your Stories.' I hope it will inspire you to write one of your own!

Part One: The Oprah-Fail Story

One of the most thrilling and terrifying moments of my life was when I was interviewed on Oprah. My publisher, HarperPerennial, had lined up some national media appearances for my book tour. An interview on Oprah was a coup for them and a chance to sell a lot of books. It didn't matter that I had never been on a national talk show. I guess they figured that with three hours of media coaching and a camera-friendly outfit, I'd be ready for prime time.

After all, what could possibly go wrong?

Imagine you are sitting three feet from Oprah. She is looking right at you asking a question. Are you fully present or is your inner voice screaming, "Oh, my God! I'm talking to Oprah!!!" It took everything I had to stay in my body and restrain my crazed-Oprah fan, so I could stay present for the 17-minute interview.

The producers warned me that Oprah might not follow the script and often veered off topic. I listened closely and prayed that what came out of my mouth would make sense. So far, so good. Oprah kept asking questions and I kept having answers to them. She didn't throw me any curve balls. Then she asked me a question that made me think of something funny, which I shared...out loud. Suddenly there was laughter, then applause. Even Oprah liked it! I thought, "This is a great sign! I must be nailing this interview! I'm going to sell a boatload of books!"

And within a second of having those thoughts, a name popped up under my image on the monitor: Jan Lunquist, Sex Educator. Jan Lunquist, Sex Educator?! That was the guest before me! What's her name doing under my face?!

After the show, the PR people at Harper were very unhappy. And I was really disappointed. Because I thought my book sales would go "Kaching!" I kept thinking that if I had been a sex educator, I would have sold a lot of books that day.

Discussion

Mentioning that I had been on Oprah could have created some distance between my audience and me. But sharing the truth about my experience brought us closer. The audience shared my shock and disappointment and laughed at the absurdity of the situation. And when they saw the photo of my face with Jan Lunquist's name below it, they let out a collective gasp.

Also, in Part Two, you'll learn that audiences love storytellers who show humility, vulnerability, a sense of humor, and make an emotional connection with the audience. The Oprah-Fail story became my signature story. I was asked to tell it wherever I spoke.

Because everyone likes a happy ending, I closed with, "But there's more to my story. First, the show fixed the graphic, put MY name beneath MY face, and re-aired the correct segment a few months later, which boosted book sales. (The audience smiles and looks relieved). Second, my interview was included in the 'Best of Oprah' week!" (Now the audience is really smiling, happy that things turned out so well.)

And then I lower the boom. "Oh, yes, the third thing. They aired the wrong version of my interview. . . again!! So, even though I made it to 'Best of Oprah', I'll go down in Oprah history as Jan Lunquist, sex educator!"

Part Two: A Guide to Developing Stories for Your Keynote

Why you Need to Include Stories

- Stories turn information into a persuasive, enjoyable talk.
- When people listen to stories, their minds and hearts are engaged. They set their skepticism aside and are more receptive to your message.

Three Places Where Stories Are Especially Effective

- Beginning of a speech: To get audience's attention and arouse interest.
- Close of a speech. To wrap up talk, inspire audience and call them to action.

- In body of the speech: Use where you want the audience to remember an idea. They remember the story and, by association, the idea it illustrates.

Components of An Effective Story

- Good stories have valuable take-aways, such as new insights, perspective and hope.
- They give the audience an experience and take them on a journey. They are not a report about what happened.
- Characters and dialogue bring the audience into the experience and help them visualize and “hear” the action.
- Good storytellers use language that creates pictures: “Picture this” or “Imagine”.
- Good stories use the proven story structure: move from an opening situation, through a complication and resolution, to a conclusion.
- A good story is not too long, not too short, and not too complicated. And if it requires too much context setting, don’t use it.

What Makes a Story Memorable

- Valuable take-aways: New Insights, Perspective, and Hope.
- Imperfect heroes with whom they can relate; believable heroes.
- Allowing audiences to feel a range of emotions. People will remember how they felt more than the story.
- Your humility, vulnerability, and a sense of humor matter more than a successful outcome. You can fail and still be a hero to the audience.

Let’s Get Creative!

Write a 1 to 2-minute story about yourself or someone else. And, if you’re interested in developing a story for your keynote, let’s have a conversation!