

Using Stories in Business and Life to Entertain, Make an Argument and Sell a Product What Happens Next – 12.12.2021

Larry Bernstein:
Welcome to What Happens Next.

My name is Larry Bernstein.

What Happens Next is a podcast where an expert is given just SIX minutes to present his argument. This is followed by a Q&A period for deeper engagement.

Today's topic is the importance of storytelling.

Our guest is Frank Rose.

Frank teaches at Columbia University's Executive MBA program with a course entitled *Strategic Storytelling*. He is also the author of the book *The Sea We Swim In: How Stories Work in a Data-Driven World*.

I picked this topic because I am fascinated by the role that storytelling plays in human interactions. Frank's presentation will focus on the changing nature of storytelling and the advent of the immersive experience in art like the interactive Van Gogh exhibits, theater such as the Shakespearean spinoff, *Sleep No More*, and the new storytelling platforms to come like Facebook's Metaverse.

We all can improve our storytelling and Frank will give suggestions on how to use detail, reading your audience, and how to show and not tell.

A few years ago, my dear friend Jack Gould who is now the retired Dean of the University of Chicago's Booth Business School asked me to teach two sessions of his MBA class. I asked him what I should talk about and he gave the greenlight to pick any topic. I decided to present the role of storytelling in business meetings and presentations.

I told 9 different stories and then I discussed with the class, why stories are memorable, how they can be successful in making key business points, and how to generate empathy.

Stories are what make us human and bring us joy.

So, with that I turn to Frank Rose, please begin your Six Minute Presentation.

Frank Rose:
Thank you, Larry. I wrote *The Sea We Swim in: How Stories Work in a Data-Driven World*, because I wanted to get across the importance of stories. Stories are how we make sense of the world, and they define what's going on around us. Stories are so powerful because they appeal to emotions and not to our rational selves.

If you're going to get your point across, you really have to understand stories and how they work. I teach at Columbia. I lead an executive education course called Strategic Story Telling. And the students are mid-career and senior level executives.

What is a story? A story is a sequence of events that involves a group of characters over a period of time. And there are two critical ingredients: time and conflict. If you don't have conflict, then you don't have a story because there's no stakes involved. There has to be a threat to your central character to have interest.

A story is a journey. It's a sequence of events. It starts in one place and it ends in another, and in between stuff happens.

Stories are specific, they happen to specific characters, and that's why we care about them. We don't care about statistics.

Neuroscience and cognitive psychology studies have demonstrated this. In the '90s this little girl named Baby Jessica fell down a well outside her aunt's house in Texas. And, there was this massive rescue effort and around the clock television coverage around the world.

Huge amounts of money poured in for Baby Jessica. Meanwhile, thousands of children are starving to death in Africa and India and they get a fraction of this amount. The studies show essentially that we give more to an individual than we do even to a pair of individuals, that when we're confronted with a massive problem we just tend to tune it out.

Stories always have a setting in a story world. They take place somewhere.

In the early 20th century we had our first immersive stories. And I'm talking about Sherlock Holmes, and Lord of the Rings, people wanted to inhabit these stories. And research in cognitive psychology and neuroscience, we're beginning to understand that the way we process stories in the brain is that we imaginatively project ourselves into the story.

We identify with characters. And the more closely we identify, the more immersed in the story we become.

We want to go there; we want to be there.

These open-ended stories like Sherlock Holmes and The Lord of the Rings or Star Wars for that matter, by creating a story world, you're giving people a way into the story. And that is a really critical factor that leads inexorably to narrative platforms as the sum of all your stories. If it's on social media, everything becomes part of our story, becomes accessible.

One of the key findings in this research is that as an audience, we are always co-creating the story in partnership with the author.

Yuval Noah Harari writes about this in his book, *Sapiens*. I quoted a brief passage in my book which I'd like to read to you now because it points out that we're not just telling a story to our audience, we're also telling a story to ourselves.

Harari writes, "The self, too, is an imaginary story just like nations, gods and money. Each of us has a sophisticated system that throws away most of our experiences, keeps only a few choice samples, mixes them up with bits from movies we've seen, novels we've read, speeches we've heard, daydreams we've

savored. And out of all of this jumble it weaves a seemingly coherent story about who I am, where I came from and where I'm going. This story tells me what to love, whom to hate and what to do with myself. The story may even cause me to sacrifice my life if that's what the plot requires. We all have a genre. Some people live in a tragedy, others inhabit a never-ending religious drama, some approach life as if it were an action film, and not a few acts as if in a comedy. But in the end, they're all just stories.

Larry Bernstein:

Love it. Let's start with the Sherlock Holmes example. I read Sherlock Holmes as a kid, and I never really imagined I was Holmes. I wasn't his sidekick, Doctor Watson either. I was trying to figure out the clues to the mystery and I was trying to see what I was missing. These were classic, who done its? Why do you think Sherlock Holmes is an immersive story?

Frank Rose:

The mystery story, whether it's Sherlock Holmes or Edgar Allan Poe's, they're interactive because we want to figure out what happened, and usually something is hidden from us that we only find in the last minute.

Arthur Conan Doyle felt that, he was kind of slumming with this stuff, and after a few years of Sherlock Holmes short stories and novels he decided to kill off his character. Even his mother advised against it, but he killed off, Sherlock Holmes. And there was an immediate hue and cry and it only grew, and eventually he had to bring the character back.

After Arthur Conan Doyle died, immediately there sprang up these Sherlock Holmes clubs in both London and New York. And these clubs were devoted to promoting the elaborate fiction.

Sherlock Holmes' address at 221B Baker Street in London was a fictional address, but then the street was extended and it became a real address. And the real address became the headquarters of a very large bank. And the bank got so many letters addressed to Sherlock Holmes that they hired an assistant whose sole job, was to write people back. "We're sorry, Sherlock Holmes, isn't taking any more cases. As he wrote in his last book, he's retired to the south of England and he is raising bees."

Larry Bernstein:

You opened your prepared remarks with your teaching mid-level executives, how to use a narrative in a corporate environment. Let's talk about marketing and advertising as an example of how to use a narrative. When I was a child, Coca-Cola had an advertisement with the football star, Mean Joe Greene, and in the commercial he is coming off the field at the end of the game, a kid comes over and they exchange a Coke. And it shows Coca-Cola as a product that could bridge the divide between a child and a football player, even one with a tough demeanor. The advertisement was a huge success. How do you think about that as an example of using a narrative to sell a product?

Frank Rose:

Rosser Reeves was head of the Ted Baker agency on Madison Avenue, one of the big ad agencies of the time. He propounded the notion that the only thing that mattered in advertising your product was what he called the Unique Selling Proposition, the USP: the idea being that every product had to have something that was unique that would make people want to buy it.

He took particular aim at Coke for what he considered their ridiculous ads. At Christmas time, for example, they would show Santa Claus with a bottle of Coke and he said, "Where's the sell?" Coke was

doing fine. People don't want to be sold to, they don't want their programs or anything else to be interrupted by ads. And if you are going to present them with an ad, you better entertain them. There's no better way to entertain than with the story.

Larry Bernstein:

In the book you mention that Mickey Drexler was working with J. Crew to create a narrative for its corporate history as the firm didn't have one. So, he bought another brand and tried to embed its history with J Crew. But as I read that part of your book, I was thinking, why can't Drexler just make something up? So many brands, just make up a narrative, make up characters. Aunt Jemima is not a real character. Why do corporations need to even have a true history for a brand?

Frank Rose:

it doesn't have to be true. Aunt Jemima, Betty Crocker, it's entirely possible to make up a story like this. You're talking about Madewell the brand bought by Mickey Drexler. And a couple of years later, they used it to introduce a line of clothing for young women, sort of hip clothing.

But Madewell, the company, was in New Bedford, Massachusetts. They made very sturdy denim clothes for factory workers and people who worked on ships and the like. It was pretty much the opposite of what the Madewell brand was kind of repurposed to be. But it does show the significance of this idea of the story and the idea that we want to have a sense of the origin of whatever it is we're buying. We want to know where it comes from, who made it, who's selling it, why they're selling it, all of these things. And this leads to the question of authenticity. As the saying goes, if you can fake that, you've got it made.

Larry Bernstein:

I'm a storyteller and I'm always confused by how much detail to include. What should get cut, what should stay in. And my view is that, either it has to assist in the narrative arc. And if it doesn't, it has to be funny on its own, otherwise it gets cut. So, how do you decide what should be included as detail in the story and what should be on the editor's floor?

Frank Rose:

That's a very good question. And there's no hard and fast answer. There's a tension between these two impulses. One side is to provide enough detail to make the situation appear realistic to give people a hook, but at the same time, you don't want to get in the way of the action. You don't want to slow the story down. There's always something to be said for keeping some tension in a story anyway.

Larry Bernstein:

I've often heard the expression in storytelling, show don't tell. Why is this important?

Frank Rose:

If we show in dramatic detail, then we can be really captivated. If you're just sort of telling what happened, if you're presenting a sequence of facts, it's just not compelling. As an audience, you need to be there as it happens to feel what they're feeling to understand the tension, to understand, whatever it is that they're facing.

Larry Bernstein:

How do you keep the attention of a broad audience? Because different audience members have different interests. How do we read the audience to know when to shorten it up, when to expand details, and maybe when to articulate the message clearly, if the kids don't get it.

Frank Rose:

Right. That's a great question. Keep a very close eye on your audience. You have to understand them as much as possible, but if you're going to be successful as a storyteller, you are by definition going to have diverse audiences. So, keep in mind that people respond to a character that has agency who can make decisions and take actions.

The thrust in storytelling technologies over the last century has been toward more detail and information. A novel or a short story, a great deal is left to the imagination. And as a reader, you're going to fill it in.

But with movies and television, suddenly a lot of more detail was filled in by the storyteller. And ultimately, you have virtual reality, which leaves almost nothing to the imagination. And yet, at the same time, you have the rise of podcasts where we are talking about individual voices. You know, it's one thing to have a podcast like this which is essentially a conversation, but the most successful podcasts are dramatizations or crime stories, that sort of thing.

And that's a situation where, people are once again, presented with only one aspect of the story, and they have to fill in the other aspects, and the same is true for audio books, of course, which have become increasingly popular too.

Larry Bernstein:

My next question is about immersive theater. In your book, you describe the play, *Sleep No More*. It's a Shakespearean play where there is no stage, no theater and no seats. The audience follows the actors around in a commercial building. Action happens and some audience members see one thing, but there are other actors and other audience members in different areas of the building who view other scenes in the same play.

Because you interact with the actors, the audience becomes part of the show. What did you think of this experiential theater and in particular *Sleep No More*?

Frank Rose:

Sleep No More is a great example of immersion. And, part of its success is, is this idea that we're not going to see the whole story as an audience member.

So, people go back again and again in hopes of getting some other part of the narrative, but this fundamental idea is to eliminate the proscenium arch in the theater, to bring the audience directly into the story.

There's this other outfit called, Secret Cinema that's led by Fabien Riggall. It's based in London that does make the audience part of the story. I was told in advance what my name was going to be as a character, what I was supposed to wear, when and where I was supposed to show up. But that was really all I knew.

I was Arthur Hudson. I was supposed to wear a suit and tie and long underwear. It was December and pretty cold. Then when I got there, to this place where they sent me in the East End, it was a library but had been done up as a courthouse. I was accused of a crime as was everybody else in the audience. So we were all led before a judge who immediately proclaimed us all guilty. And then we were led out into an asphalt courtyard in the back of the building. We were lined up against the wall and marched around the neighborhood and eventually onto a prison bus, and we were taken to this prison. It was a 19th century Catholic elementary school, and it really did look like a prison. Eventually, it became apparent that we were taking part in *The Shawshank Redemption*.

And eventually we were shown the movie. That's why it's called, Secret Cinema, because they don't tell you what movie you're going to be part of. You have to sort of guess it along the way. And at the end you get to see the movie. It was extremely dramatic and, you know, really like nothing I had ever experienced before.

There's a certain amount of novelty value, but I think there's something more that is changing about our attitude toward not only theater, but also all kinds of media experiences. Increasingly, we want theater without proscenium arch. We'd like television or movies without a screen. We'd like to have paintings without a frame, you know, paintings that we can walk into.

We don't want barriers. We want to merge with a story and that's what's happening.

Larry Bernstein:

There's this new immersive art exhibit about works by Van Gogh which you can see in a large auditorium, where they project various Van Gogh paintings on the walls and the images move around. The public loves it.

Why is the public so engaged with this art form? Apparently even more so than going to see real paintings by Van Gogh at an art museum. Do you think this is a fad? I can't imagine you're going to participate in this Secret Cinema more than once or twice.

Frank Rose:

I feel like there's a big appetite for this sort of stuff.

I'd really like to draw a line between Secret Cinema or Sleep No More on the one hand and experiences like the sort that puts you in the middle of a Van Gogh painting.

One is a more or less an authentic experience and the other is not. Nonetheless they both speak to the same thing, which is this desire to really immerse ourselves in a story, or in an experience, in a painting. That's what's salient.

Larry Bernstein:

Another example of an immersive movie is the film, the Rocky Horror Picture Show. Every Saturday night at midnight, a local theater will show it and the audience will dress up as a character in the film. They'll interact by screaming and yelling at the movie screen and fully participate with the film. This movie was produced in 1975, and it's still actively shown. I can't think of another movie like it. Why haven't others followed their lead?

Frank Rose:

There is something unique about the Rocky Horror Picture Show. It speaks to the idea of having a communal experience with a lot of people you don't know in a theater.

Larry Bernstein:

Each episode, I end on a note of optimism. What are you optimistic about, specifically about storytelling and the future of the narrative?

Frank Rose:

I read this story in The Times this morning that really put a lot of things in perspective. We've become used to the idea that Facebook and other social media platforms have these algorithms that feed us more and more extreme versions of what we want to hear, more and more extreme stories of right-wing white supremacy, that sort of thing. But this story that I read this morning was about exactly the opposite happening.

It was about a young guy in his early 20s who grew up in Arkansas in this extremely religious family. He was homeschooled, and he had almost no exposure to the real world. And then, he discovered the internet and it had, sort of, the opposite effect on him. It created an avenue for him to explore the world beyond the limited, extremely religious worldview that his parents imposed on him.

So, shortly after Trump was inaugurated in January 2017, he went to this demonstration in Memphis and he was appalled by all the evidence of conspiracy theories and so forth and people that were all around him and this demonstration. And so, he ripped down a poster. And, on the back of it, he wrote "birds aren't real." And then he parlayed this into an entire fake movement. He wrote a backstory in which beginning in the 1970s, these "deep state operatives", replaced actual birds with drones to the point where there are no more birds anymore now.

He presented this in a very tongue and cheek fashion as if it were real QAnon-type conspiracy. And there's something so powerful about turning this kind of QAnon thing on its head and making merciless fun of it. What really struck me was how the internet became his conduit to reality. And that makes me very optimistic. Because it's not a one-way street.

The internet has many sources. It can take us in many different directions. It depends on who we are and where we want to go. And I find that really reassuring.

Larry Bernstein:

Frank Rose, thank you so much for joining us today.

That ends today's session, and I would like to make a plug for next week's program.

Our first speaker will be Leo Melamed who is the former chairman of the Chicago Mercantile Exchange, which is the leading futures exchange in the world. Leo has been a visionary in the industry and helped create financial futures. Leo was instrumental in the design of the E-Mini S&P 500 future which is today the most liquid equity futures contract. He also conceived the foreign exchange future like the US Dollar vs. Japanese Yen contracts as well as the Eurodollar LIBOR futures contract which allows speculators to bet on the direction of short-term interest rates.

Leo pushed the CME away from open outcry trading to an electronic execution platform. Our discussion will focus on how to influence change in a large organization when certain parties oppose it.

Leo will also speak about his role in the investigation of the Hillary Clinton Cattle Futures scandal.

Our second speaker is David Kronfeld who is a former venture capitalist, Booz Allen consultant, and corporate executive at Ameritech. David has a new book entitled Remarkable: Proven Insights to Accelerate Your Career. David uses his real-life examples to teach how to negotiate, how to find common ground internally, and how to appreciate the perspective of your counterpart to solve problems.

I think you will be amazed by David Kronfeld's advice that can improve your performance at work and in life.

If you are interested in listening to a replay of today's What Happens Next program or any of our previous episodes or if you wish to read a transcript, you can find them on our website, Whathappensnextin6minutes.com. Replays are also available on Apple Podcasts, Podbean and Spotify.

I would like to thank our listeners for their time and for engaging with these complex issues. Good bye.