

## About the author:

*Matt Norcia has over 20 years of experience in all facets of retail and customer service. For the past 10 years Matt served in the training and development department for Bose Corporation's sales organization.*

*Matt was instrumental in developing and delivering some of the company's most innovative, dynamic, and successful training programs in a variety of areas including customer service, selling, and operations.*

*Matt is a member of the American Society of Training and Development (ASTD), the Society for Human Resources Management (SHRM), and the American Film Institute (AFI).*

*As a training specialist, Matt has earned a reputation as an effective, entertaining, and personable presenter. His unique approach also applies to the materials he has created to support his training solutions. His use of video, music, and alternative media to reinforce key points has earned accolades from clients as well as students.*

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## Once Upon a Time Using Storytelling in Retail

*Tools for the Experience Series*

Once upon a time...

...there was a retailer with a dream.

How much of your employee development is focused on by-the-book skills practice and operational learning, and how much is devoted to telling stories? I'm serious. Storytelling is a great way to communicate not only the functional aspects of your employees' jobs, but your company's culture as well. Psychologically and culturally, regardless of our individual learning style, we are wired to better comprehend and remember lessons when they are presented to us as allegories or anecdotes. Think of the lessons you learned as a child that were taught to you through storytelling. I'd wager many, if not all of them, are still with you today and have quite possibly shaped your personality.

When I was training employees for Bose it was imperative to communicate the elements of the company's unique culture, since so much of what had built the organization was based on anecdotal experiences as opposed to conventional wisdom. The best way to do this was to relate stories from the company's past. Over time these narratives had become the foundation for the company's philosophy, and nearly every employee was able to understand and convey the company's differentiation via several true stories. For example, every retail employee who attended orientation training walked away able to tell the story of how Dr. Amar Bose started on the path to founding his company. This set the stage for much of the learning they would later receive, and it was invaluable in their engagements with customers.

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Likewise, by hearing several different customer-based stories, the retail sales talent was able to appreciate how their customers would be using the products once they got them home. As trainers we found that we could spend countless hours drilling technical facts and sales methodology into our employees heads, resulting in a typical retail sales staff. However, when we related product features and benefits into real-life scenarios, there was greater understanding, retention, and the employees were able to successfully apply their knowledge on the sales floor without overwhelming their customers with technical jargon.

Take a look at this description of a feature found in a high-end home theater system.

“This system features Digital Dynamic Range compression which, as a variable of volume, adjusts the center channel to make sure dialog is intelligible while maintaining high impact effects.”

Huh? I think I get it, but the real-life benefit is lost on me.

“A couple with two young children asleep in the next room can still enjoy the full impact of their movies’ soundtracks thanks to Digital Dynamic Range compression.”

The first approach is techno-speak and does a good job of defining what the technology does. It’s a good way to show the customer how smart you are, but a lousy way to sell a product. The second approach is more human and relates a benefit of the technology, one that can be readily appreciated by customers, especially if they have young children.

How do you get your sales talent to convey features and benefits in a real-world manner? You train them using real-world scenarios. It’s perfectly acceptable (and in some cases, necessary) to explain a feature in explicit technical terms, especially if it’s unique to that product. However, it’s crucial that your employees are able to speak about that feature’s benefits to their customers in real-world terms. Therefore, part of your training should focus on the story (or stories) around the feature. Here’s what it is, this is what it does, and this is how a customer can use and appreciate it. All too often training stops after explaining what it does.

Storytelling can also reinforce important points about the customer experience. Here is a story I used to tell my trainees at Bose to drive home the ultimate impact of what we sell to our customers.

“It was a quiet Monday morning in March. My colleague Rick and I were the only ones on staff until noon, and we hadn’t seen a customer all day. Around 10:30 the door opened and in walked an older man and woman. They weren’t elderly by any stretch of the imagination, but they were most likely retired and into the late autumn of their lives. It was evident by looking at the woman that she was stricken with an affliction of age; her face was gaunt and her movements were slow and cautious. The gentleman had opened the door for her and held her hand as they walked into the store.

Like most customers their age, they made their way to the Wave® radio display. Rick engaged them and answered their questions and demonstrated the product.

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After the demonstration, the couple began to talk between themselves. It was obvious that the gentleman wanted to buy the radio, but his wife was resistant.

“Please, let me buy it for you,” gently pleaded the man

“We can’t afford it,” sighed the woman.

“I really want you to have it,” said the man.

“With my bills,” lightly argued the woman, “we can’t afford it.”

This went on for a little while, their voices never rising to anger or frustration. It was obvious that the woman wanted her husband to buy the radio, but was concerned with the financial impact it might make.

Eventually she relented with a smile and the man turned to Rick. “We’ll take one,” he said with a tone of excitement. While Rick proceeded to ring up the sale I ran to the stock room and picked out a radio. When I returned, the woman had stepped outside while her husband was handing over his credit card.

“Isn’t that always the way?” Rick said to our customer. “Even when you want to buy her something nice, she doesn’t want you to spend the money.”

The old man nodded his head. “It’s been that way for fifty years,” he said with a smile that quickly vanished. “But not much longer,” he added, almost to himself.

Rick and I both stopped what we were doing and looked at the man, an expression of pained resignation on his face. “She’s going into the hospital the day after tomorrow,” he explained. “And we both know she’s not coming out. For most of her life my wife taught music to elementary school children. She loves music. Sometimes I think she loves it more than she loves me.” He smiled, then he sighed. “So when she goes into the hospital we’ll bring this with us and put it beside her bed so she can hear that music she’s loved all her life. Even as she draws her last breath.” The old man patted the white box containing the radio. “And after she’s gone I can listen to this and think of her.”

After the story was told, there’d inevitably be a few teary eyes in the room. I’d then explain, in a soft voice, the moral is that our customer isn’t buying a box, or even the product that’s inside. What they’re buying is a possible lifetime of future experiences. The product in the box is merely a tool to help them punctuate those experiences. It’s what the customer does with the product that defines its true value. I still have folks I trained 10 years ago tell me they remember that story and how it moved them and shaped their approach to their customers. More than a few make it a point to tell it to their new employees.

Like a lot of what you do as a retailer, storytelling is an art. While everybody can do it with some degree of success, it takes consistent practice to do it well.

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Which stories of your own experience can you share with your employees to add value to their work, or improve their morale? Which of those stories can they pass on to your customers to help differentiate your business from the competition? Have you ever told your employees how and/or why you started your business? How about telling them what past experiences or individuals inspired your businesses values? The stories should be truthful, relatively brief, inspiring, and (perhaps most difficult) interesting.

Once you've decided on your stories, share them with your employees. It doesn't hurt to tell them more than once; the words will come to you more naturally the more you tell them. Encourage your employees to share their own stories. After a while you'll find that storytelling will be an important part of your culture. Your employees will have a clearer picture of your ambitions, and better understand the role they can play, and your customers will be able to differentiate you from the competition.

And you'll all live happily ever after.

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