



# Seed to CEO

A practical guide for entrepreneurial people and organizations.

## Issue Ten

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## How to Spin a Great Business Story

Once upon a time, the elements of a great business story seemed simple: a catchy opening, an inspirational anecdote or two, a hard-driving plot that led from rags to riches. These days, however, business storytelling is a much more complex enterprise than it once was, and shrewd business owners recognize that a story focusing on a lone hero is, in many cases, not the smartest story to tell.

In my last column, I lamented that so many inventive Nova Scotian businesses don't seem able to invent compelling business stories. The good news is that such stories are easier to create than one might think. They are easily home-grown, if you keep in mind the following five principles:

1. Great business stories use the power of surprise to create grand openings. They start not with a fizzle but a bang. They grab listeners or readers by the shirt collar, pique their curiosity, shake up their expectations. The power of "once upon a time" as a story opener is that it instantly draws us into another world where we know fabulous things will happen. You can create the same effect for a company story by leading with a question, stating an unusual fact, or turning a cliché inside out.

2. Great business stories proceed by pattern, not strict chronology. Simply relating a series of events, even when they describe progress, does not make a genuine story. Storytellers, unlike chroniclers, artfully arrange events in meaningful ways. It's no accident that fairy tales and folk tales thrive on incidents that happen in threes. A single occurrence appears to be random, but a repeated event implies a predictable pattern. Shape the plot of your business story, then, to show that you are fulfilling a pattern that predicts success.

3. Great business stories revolve around a central metaphor. When I hear a so-called business story that consists mainly of lists of evidence, events, or features, I'm reminded of a box full of parts to an Ikea wall unit, without any diagram telling me how to put them together. The diagram of the wall unit gives me an image to hold onto so I can fit the pieces together. In the same way, the audience of a business story (especially a non-technical audience) needs a single mental picture, something concrete they can use to make sense of all the little pieces of information that make up the story. Whether you're describing the history of the company for investors or a new product for customers, find a central comparison to an everyday object or experience to anchor your story and make it real.

4. Great business stories use images to seize the imagination. A single, well-developed word-picture can last longer in your audience's mind than a whole pile of statistics. Give your business story folkloric appeal by abandoning technospeak for earthy, tactile images. Enable your audience to see, feel, hear, smell, and taste your product. Allow people to imagine themselves using it rather than just looking at it.

5. Great business stories interconnect with other stories. Savvy business storytellers realize that The

## Should You Publish an Email Newsletter?

Email newsletters are a powerful marketing tool. They help you stay in touch with potential customers and keep your company name top-of-mind. They can increase visits to your website and calls to your business. Most important, providing good solid information demonstrates your expertise in your field.

So how do you get started on publishing an email newsletter? Here are a few tips for getting your newsletter off the ground.

### Decide on the content

Who is your newsletter for? What do you want to achieve by sending it? If you just want to keep your customers informed about your company, consider a monthly update with news on product developments and mini-case studies that profile your satisfied customers and solutions to problems to which others can relate. Keep in mind though, most people are probably not that interested in knowing about your company picnic or new hire. But they are likely interested in receiving useful information that they may not have the time to find elsewhere.

People get a lot of email and they don't have time to read a lot of text. Newsletters must be designed to facilitate scanning, so use short sentences, short paragraphs and bullets to communicate. Offer specials to subscribers only, and encourage readers to tell friends and colleagues about your newsletter.

### Decide on the frequency

Choosing how often you should publish your newsletter depends on who your customers are and how much information you want to include in each issue. A regular publication schedule lets readers know when to look for the newsletter and reduces the probability that it will be deleted because it is confused with spam.

Quarterly or monthly may be just right for providing company updates and outside resources; monthly or biweekly may work best if

### Shoestring Marketing: Mini Case Studies

Mini "case studies" are a persuasive marketing tool to show prospective customers that you know how to solve their problems and meet their needs. Use this PAR formula to develop your customer stories, and include them in your ads, brochures, and proposals.

**Problem:** What was the problem your customer asked you to solve?

**Action:** What specific steps did you take to solve your customer's problem or help them achieve a desired goal?

**Result:** How did your client benefit from the work you did, and what were his or her reactions to the good news? ✕

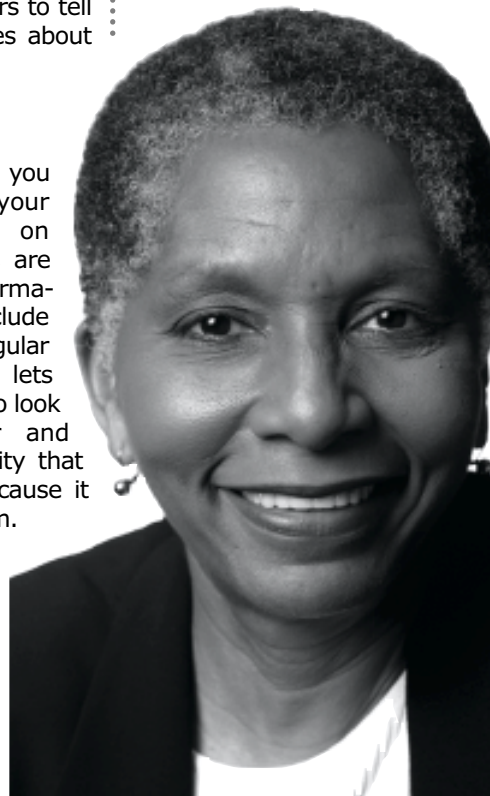
*"Genius is one percent inspiration and ninety-nine percent perspiration."*

Thomas Edison



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Company is not as an isolated protagonist but rather one character in a complex economic plot. The truth is that, even before you open your mouth to begin your story, your listeners have already plotted you into a story of their own, based on the prevailing business narrative of the day. Such stories shift with the economic tide. Five years ago, for instance, the popular story was that the eLearning industry would grow overnight to reach the sudden height of Jack's magical beanstalk. Today, the dominant economic story is that the industry is growing steadily, but not miraculously. Skilled business storytellers know how to adjust the company story to accommodate the larger economic story of the moment.

This final characteristic is what, in many cases, makes the difference between a mediocre business story and a knock-their-socks-off business story. Management researcher Ellen O'Connor calls the ability to position a business story within a framework of other narratives—whether they're individual, cultural, or economic—"narrative sensemaking." This, she claims, is an essential survival skill for entrepreneurs in today's market, where stories as well as products need to compete.

Like any tale worth telling, a compelling business narrative draws on patterns and images that speak to the human imagination. Ultimately, though, business stories succeed by resonating in harmony with the other popular stories—individual, cultural, and economic—we tell ourselves. Here again, we can take a lesson from folktales, which are never static but subtly transform themselves from culture to culture and generation to generation.

Fortunately, you don't need a slick Bay Street P.R. firm to create a high-impact business story. All you need is an ear for stories and plenty of common sense—both of which are in strong Maritime supply. So enough dreary product descriptions and business plans written in deadly, impersonal prose. It's time we heard some colourful, real homespun business yarns.

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you're planning to provide a short list of free tips or links to resources for your readers.

**Decide on the format**

Email newsletters come in three main formats: HTML, plain text, or as an attachment (such as Acrobat PDF, MS Word, etc.). They can all carry the same content, all can help achieve your marketing goals, and all can readily include hyperlinks for response or providing additional information. Each type has advantages and disadvantages. HTML newsletters can be much more attractive than plain text, but may take longer to download, and not everyone has email software that displays HTML. Plain text is much easier to develop without design software or expertise, but tends to be much less interesting than HTML. Attachments require an extra click to open and external software to be read. Keep your customers' software capabilities in mind when you decide which format(s) work best for you.

**Decide how you'll distribute it**

If you have only a few hundred email contacts, you can probably manage your email database yourself. If you want to distribute your newsletter much more widely, you may want to consider paying a small fee to have another company take care of distribution, or subscribe to distribution services on the Internet.

Make sure that you ask your customers for permission to send them your newsletter, and make it easy for them to unsubscribe. The last thing you want to do is annoy your customers with unwanted emails, or worse, find yourself labeled as a 'spammer.'

**Tips for success**

- Writing good subject lines is especially important, both to encourage users to open the newsletter and to distinguish the newsletter from spam. Make sure your subject line clearly identifies who the newsletter is from, and the name of your newsletter.

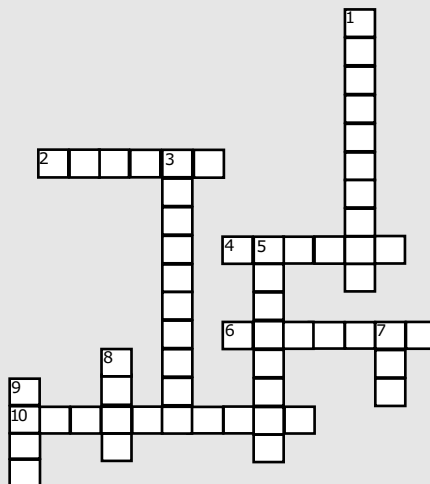
- Avoid using 'spam triggers' in your newsletter. Some of the most common words and symbols are '\$'; "!!"; "unsubscribe"; and using words in all caps.

E-newsletters can be effective marketing tools if you're strategic about how they're done, why you're doing them and who receives them.

*MediaSpark also publishes an award-winning newsletter called GoVenture Live the Learning. Subscribe for free on our website! ✕*

**Test your knowledge of the information contained in this issue of Seed-to-CEO!**

Answers Below



**ACROSS**

- 2 What 'A' in the PAR case-study formula stands for
- 4 Use these to seize the imagination of viewers
- 6 A compelling business narrative draws on both \_\_\_ and images.
- 10 Ask for this before sending email newsletters to customers

**DOWN**

- 1 Powerful marketing tool
- 3 Meet with vendors to help determine your
- 5 A central \_\_\_ is key to a business story
- 7 Submit a written \_\_\_ to vendors
- 8 Electronic newsletter format
- 9 Avoid these triggers in your newsletter

**Ask MediaSpark ...**

*I need to hire a service company. How can I make sure I get good value?*

*Send us your business or technology question!*

First, have a clear understanding of your business objective and what is needed to meet that objective. If you are unsure, meet with one or more vendors to help define your needs. Many offer free consultations, which can be very valuable, both for you to discover what you need and for the vendors to know how to respond. Then determine if there is a common price and quality standard for the service you are seeking. If there isn't, make extra effort to qualify the companies that you approach. Ask about past successes and consider the types of questions they ask about your business. Don't be influenced by flash – look for substance and a clear understanding of your needs. Then submit a written Request for Proposal (RFP) to selected vendors, describing your needs and include as much detail as possible. Also keep in mind that, normally, you can only have two of the following three features: fast turnaround time; lowest cost; highest quality. ✕

ACROSS: 2 ACTION | 4 IMAGES | 6 PATTERN | 10 PERMISSION  
DOWN: 1 NEWSLETTER | 3 OBJECTIVES | 4 PICTURE | 5 METAPHOR | 7 RFP | 8 HTML | 9 SPAM

**About Seed-to-CEO**

**Contact us to ...**

**RECEIVE** this newsletter by email.

**ADD A FRIEND** to our mailing list.

**BE REMOVED** from future mailings.

**DISCUSS** your software development, eLearning, website, and print design needs.

**Coming soon in future issues!**

- What's Your Culture?
- Business etiquette
- Networking
- Corporate Messenger - the Logo

**Seed-to-CEO** is written and published eight times a year by **MediaSpark Inc.**, an award-winning technology and design company.

Over the years we have helped many organizations achieve business success by providing assistance and guidance on a number of technology, education, and marketing related initiatives. The objective of this newsletter is to extend our experience to a wider community in hopes of helping our clients, associates, friends, and prospective customers to become more successful—and to save them time, money, and stress while doing so!

We welcome your comments. Please contact us to explore how we may assist you on your road to success.

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