



# How Unique Stories Accelerate the Sales Cycle

HELP YOUR TEAM GET  
MORE REFERRALS AND ORDERS  
THROUGH THE POWER  
OF UNIQUE SALES STORIES

**By Mark Satterfield**

**A**s a wise mentor of mine once said, “People don’t remember facts. They remember stories.” If you want more referrals for your business, the key is to be top of mind when people have a need or learn about opportunities that make sense for you. As I learned from hard-won experience, simply educating people about what I did wasn’t enough. In order to be remembered, I needed to make my services come alive through the use of unique sales stories.

Now, I will admit that this is hardly news. Sales professionals have known for years that using metaphors, case studies and stories is a time-honored method for standing out among the competition, which then raises the question, “Why are some people so good at this while others are so painfully bad?”

It’s a bit like cooking. Most of us know the basics. So why are so few of us accomplished chefs? I think great chefs are a lot like great storytellers. The key is that they understand how the ingredients fit together. They know when to add a touch of this or a dash of that. It’s part science, but it’s also part art. I’m not sure that the art part can be taught, but the science of it certainly can. While you may never publish the Great American Novel, you can learn how to tell a story that gets your point across in an educational and memorable way.

Great chefs and storytellers also share a process: they both begin with the end in mind. The great chef visualizes the outcome—the succulent crispy duck or the moist three-layer chocolate and strawberry cake. He doesn’t simply start dumping ingredients into a bowl and hope something delicious will emerge. He begins at the end, which is something the gifted storyteller does, as well.

Unlike the chef, however, far too many fledgling storytellers think they can get away with just winging it. After all, we’ve told stories to each other for how many years? I mean, can it really be all that difficult?

Truth be told, there is a huge difference between telling a story to your friends and communicating a unique sales story to prospects who will keep you in the front of their mind when they hear about opportunities that would be perfect for you.

## STORIES LEAD TO REFERRALS

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The first question you want to ask is, “What is the point I want to make?” This is a bit like working the puzzle maze backward or beginning with the end in mind. For example, suppose I wanted to make the point that starting an entrepreneurial venture or small business is a path best traveled by those with a burning desire for independence? Now, there’s nothing particularly earth shattering about that statement. It seems like common sense, and the moment someone told you that fact you’d probably forget all about it.

To set the stage for what I’m about to share, let’s focus on something that would appear to be a blinding grasp of the obvious. In order to get more referrals, people need to

know who you are and what you do. You need to be top of mind when opportunities arise for people to send business your way. Now, if you sell a tangible product, this may be relatively easy. Need tires? Go to Bob. But what if you sell services, especially high-value services that don't lend themselves to a 10-second elevator pitch?

The reality is that if you sell complex solutions, it's difficult enough to get people to understand what you do in the first place, much less enable them to remember what you do a few days later.

For example, I sat next to a very nice person on the plane and asked him what he did, to which he replied that he was a "supply-chain consultant." Sounds very impressive. Probably quite complex. I imagine that he most likely has an advanced degree and considerable experience in the field. I further imagine that companies pay him a considerable amount of money for his expertise.

There's only one problem: I don't have any idea what he does.

I don't share this story with you to belittle the person or point nagging fingers at him. He seemed smart and down-to-earth, and there's no doubt in my mind that he probably is good at what he does.

I just don't know what that is.

Since I was curious, I decided to ask him how he got new clients. Not surprisingly, he said all of his business came from referrals. When I asked him how that worked for him, his answer was surprisingly candid.

"It's a bit of a mixed bag," he replied. "On the one hand, the quality of clients I get from referrals is great. They're positively predisposed to me and what I do. Instead of selling my services, I am simply explaining what I do. That's real comfortable for me, since I'm not an in-your-face kind of salesperson. But, that said, I just don't get as many referrals as I need. I might get one or two a month and then nothing for the next three months. I'm not sure why."

Trying to be helpful, I asked him to tell me a bit more about what a supply-chain consultant does. To mix metaphors, my ears glazed over after 30 seconds. His response included something about "optimizing the distribution channels between the core manufacturing center and the consumer experience."

Although I didn't have a good understanding about what he did (actually, I had no understanding about what he did), I did have a pretty good sense about why he wasn't getting more referrals.

If I don't "get" what you do, it's going to be difficult for me to be helpful, despite how much I want to be. So how can we make it easier for people to truly understand you?

WHEN YOU CREATE YOUR OWN  
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One way was brought home to me the following week, again on a plane trip.

“So what type of work do you do?”

“I’m a supply-chain consultant.” (What were the odds?)

“I’m afraid I don’t know what that is.”

“Well, suppose you’re in the chicken business. They’re pretty perishable things, and I don’t know if you’ve ever unwrapped a chicken you’ve bought at the grocery store that’s gone bad, but it’s not an experience you want to repeat. Anyway, the tricky part is, how do you get the chicken from the farm to the retail store in less than three days ready to be cooked and smelling nice? That process has a lot of moving parts, a lot of people involved—actually a lot of different companies—and if one thing breaks down from farm to grocery store, the whole thing turns into an enormous, foul-smelling hair ball real quickly. So basically what I do is look at all the steps in the process and try to figure out if there is some way we can do them faster, better, less expensively or more efficiently.”

What a difference! I found that I was paying attention to what he was saying, and I actually understood it well enough that I’m able to retell it to you.

So what was the difference? Two people in the same business. Both intelligent. Both probably good at what they do; however, I’m probably going to refer business (and I actually do know a VP of operations he should be talking to) to only one of them. Why does the second guy get the referral?

He told me a story.

That’s the power of what I call your “unique sales stories.” They not only enable people to understand what you do, they also enable them to repeat your story to others.

Brad Mitchum is the VP of operations I mentioned a moment ago. I don’t know what will happen as a result of my putting him and my seatmate together, but I do know that it wouldn’t have happened if my seatmate hadn’t told me his own unique sales story.

## BEGINNING YOUR UNIQUE SALES STORY: THE 3 KEY ELEMENTS

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Marshall Coltrain gazed at the shattered window from which now protruded a branch that had, until recently, held his eight-year-old daughter’s swing. With a sigh of frustration and fear, he contemplated the wreckage and mused to himself, “Damn, I hope this is covered.”

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Although the casual observer would never guess, vice president of operations Dan Townsend emerged from his staff meeting in a rage. “What is wrong with these people? They can’t get along for two minutes without adult supervision. There’s no way I’ll get the

process control system implemented by July if this backbiting and petty sniping doesn't come to halt. I wish I could just fire the lot of them."

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It's often been said that the most important sentence is the first one. Its goal is to get you to read the second sentence. There is a similar thought process when you are developing unique sales stories. The goal of the first paragraph is to hook your readers, to engage them in the story that is about to follow. Arguably, the opening paragraph is the most important section of your unique sales story.

### **THE PROBLEMS YOUR SALESPEOPLE FACE**

Prospects don't understand the uniqueness of your services or products.

You're viewed as a commodity.

The client isn't willing to take action.

The client never makes a decision. (This is probably the biggest one.)

The prospects buy from someone else.

Salespeople lack referrals.

### **1. Problem**

Great sales stories revolve around a problem—the gap that exists between the current state and the desired state; however, when creating sales stories, we need to do more than just state the

problem. That is seldom enough to draw the attention of our reader or listener. There are two other elements that need to be introduced along with the problem.

### **2. Characters**

The first of these is the cast of characters. All stories need characters, and in sales stories, they need to be people to whom your prospects can relate. If you're selling insurance, a good character would be the victim of a flood or storm. If you're in the leadership advice business, the main character would most likely be an executive who is frustrated with internal communications, organizational silos or overt corporate politics. In other words, the main character, the person who suffers from the problem, needs to closely resemble the prospect you're targeting.

### **3. Context**

Second, we need to combine the problem with what is referred to by writers as "context." This is the place in which the story occurs. Leave this out and you substantially increase the chances of losing the attention of your reader or listener. It's important to remember that in the opening moments of your story the reader is not only digesting what you are communicating, but also making a decision about whether he wants to continue reading or listening. This is the reason an effective opening hook is layered with more details than one might initially assume.

Let's take a look at how these three elements—problem, character and context—work together to create a strong opening for your sales story. In order to do that, I'll use the examples from earlier.

When you read the two opening story lines, one point becomes immediately apparent: they're very specific. One is obviously a sales story that is focused on homeowner's insurance. The other is perhaps a bit less obvious, but the target audience would recognize it as a story that will focus on leadership. Very specific messages to very specific markets.

This is important and spells the difference between stories that command attention and

those that are ignored. Granted, it would be ideal to simply write one story that appeals to everyone. Unfortunately, that is virtually impossible. The marketing fields are littered with the carcasses of sales stories that never worked for precisely that reason.

Here's a common example of a too-general niche market: small businesses. Unfortunately, defining your market that way is like saying, "Let's go eat American food." You just haven't narrowed the options down enough. From a practical perspective, small businesses usually don't think of themselves that way. Rather, they define themselves as a consultant, a manufacturer, a retailer, or something far more specific. In order for your sales story to resonate, it needs to be targeted to a very specific niche. The world is just too crowded and noisy. If the message isn't specific, it's simply ignored. Thus, defining a niche market is the crucial first step.

Let's examine the opening sentence from the first example: *Marshall Coltrain gazed at the shattered window from which now protruded a branch that had, until recently, held his eight-year-old daughter's swing.*

There are a few points to take away from this opening sentence that will help you in the development of your sales stories. First, name your characters. If your story is a composite, simply put an asterisk next to the name that leads to a disclaimer box at the bottom of your page. Although I claim no legal expertise on this, I use language such as, *"The following is an illustrative example and no representation of any real person, living or dead, is intended."*

Naming your characters makes your audience care about the characters' problems. Remember, your readers and listeners need to be able to relate to the person if they are eventually to buy into your recommended solution. As those in fundraising know, tell me about one million people who are dying in Africa, and I'll turn a blind eye. It's just not something I can relate to; however, tell me the story about Orphan Sam, who is forced to live on the streets and eat bugs to survive, and I'll whip out my checkbook.

We also want to provide as much background context as possible. Is Coltrain married? Single? Does he have kids? The answer is immediately apparent by telling your reader that the tree branch, until recently, supported his daughter's swing.

Here's a tip for writing context into your sales story: start by writing just the descriptive sentence. *"The tree crashed through the window."* Now ask yourself, how can I make this more interesting? We know that the first step is to name the character. What else? Picture the event in your mind. Visualization is key for writing effective stories. What part of the tree came through the window? The trunk? A branch? What was on the branch? You get the idea.

Let's take a look at the second sentence: *With a sigh of frustration and fear, he contemplated the wreckage and mused to himself, "Damn, I hope this is covered."*

Two helpful points to keep in mind: first, try to use emotion when you are writing. Words such as "frustration" and "fear" let us know about the state of mind of your main character. Again, this is important in order to allow our reader to relate to the story.

(As an aside, I suggest that you first write out all of your sales stories. You'll find that it's easy to convert stories from the printed page to the spoken word. Plus, the discipline that it takes to actually write out a sales story will ensure that yours have the appropriate amount of context and detail).

Second, particularly in your written sales stories, include dialogue. This will make your stories come alive. The dialogue can take the form of both conversations between characters and internal thoughts: *"Damn, I hope this is covered"* brings our character to life and highlights the specific problem that he is facing. In fact, with just six words, we've effectively zeroed in on the subject of the rest of the story.

If we look at the second example, we see that it also includes character, context and problem: *Although the casual observer would never guess, vice president of operations Dan Townsend emerged from his staff meeting in a rage. "What is wrong with these people? They can't get along for two minutes without adult supervision. There's no way I'll get the process control system implemented by July if this backbiting and petty sniping doesn't come to halt. I wish I could just fire the lot of them."*

If you are creating sales stories in the business-to-business market, it's often a good idea to give an organizational title to your character. This not only adds a layer of context to the story but also sends a clear message as to who your target market is.

In this example, there is more detail about the specifics of the problem. Dan is under a deadline to complete a project, and his staff members are continually fighting among themselves—certainly a scenario to which many project leaders in organizations both

### **THIS IS WHY STORIES ARE THE ANSWER...**

Logic versus emotion. We buy on emotion and justify with logic. Stories enable us to connect on an emotional level. Prospects don't really understand the true benefits of what we offer until they hear the story. Most people sell with statistics and facts, but we tend to distrust facts and figures. We can't picture them. Thus a single story is more powerful than countless statistics. For example, smokers often justify their smoking by telling the story of the one person they know who smoked three packs a day and lived to be 95. They'll believe that smoking may not be bad for them despite all the statistical evidence to the contrary.

The number one objection salespeople face is "no decision." If I can't visualize how your solution will make my future better, I may not say no, but I'll also not say yes. Stories enable us to visualize outcomes. People buy because they're frustrated with a problem and see what you are offering as the solution. If we share a story about someone who is similarly frustrated, it's likely they'll feel that our solution will meet their need.

Two different types of messages: 1) Brand messages are about me and tend to be communicated by written word. 2) Sales messages are delivered one to one and through speech. *You kill yourself when you try to sell using the marketing story.*

- An analogy is dating. Your personal brand consists of the car you drive, the clothes you wear, the watch you own—they all add up to the brand image. But if on the date all you talk about is the brand message (me, me, me), your date will think you're egomaniacal.
- Same thing with sales. In order to engage our prospect, we must shift the focus from me to you. We need to translate the story about you into a story about your prospect.
- As any great trial attorney knows, ultimately the person who tells the best story wins.

large and small can relate. If this sales story is marketed to senior-level executives, it is likely one that will capture their attention.

Again, the combination of character, context and problem, when combined in the opening paragraph, serves as an excellent hook to draw readers in.

## DEVELOPING THE FRAMEWORK FOR YOUR SALES STORY

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On some level, we are all storytellers. Whether it's a joke, recounting the foibles of a co-worker or presenting to a live audience of hundreds, telling stories is something with which we're familiar.

Which raises the question, if we can all tell stories, why are some of us so good at it while others are so bad? Why do some people captivate us while others bore us to tears?

As I mentioned earlier, storytelling is a bit like cooking. Most of us understand the rudiments of cooking, but so few of us are really good at it. I can prepare a meal that is edible (sometimes) but would be hard pressed to create one that garners raves from my guests.

My friend, executive chef Richard Huntington, has an interesting perspective that relates to the challenges storytellers face when constructing a message that captivates and influences their audiences:

*"The average home chef begins by assembling the ingredients, lining them up nicely on the counter. Then he begins to add them one by one,*

*albeit in a somewhat arbitrary manner. In fact, it may have more to do with the time it takes to chop something or open the can than it does any other single factor.*

*"The top chefs, by contrast, begin with the end in mind. They visualize what they want the dish to look and taste like. Then, and only then, do they decide when to add the various ingredients. To the untrained eye, it may appear that a 'dab of this' and a 'dash of that' are added without much thought; I can tell you that this is far from the truth."*

In this regard, preparing a great dish and creating a great sales story are similar. The important first step in the process is to determine what the point is that you want to make, what message you want to convey.

### STEP 1: DETERMINE YOUR POINT

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In my sales presentations, I tell a story about how I went to Washington University in St. Louis. I begin by simply stating the fact: *"I graduated from Washington University in St. Louis."* I then pause for five seconds (which is an excruciatingly long time when you're in front of an audience).

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PEOPLE NEED TO KNOW WHO YOU  
ARE AND WHAT YOU DO. YOU NEED  
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## WHY YOU AREN'T AS GOOD AT THIS AS YOU THINK YOU ARE

Sales professionals really don't have great stories at their fingertips. Quick—tell me a story that communicates one of the biggest benefits about your product or service. Quick—tell me a story that addresses one of the main reasons why people don't do business with you.

The typical story is all about you: who you are, what you do, who you've helped and how you've helped them.

- The assumption is, if your prospects knew as much about your company and its solutions, they'd want to buy from you.
- The reality is, a great sales story is about the prospect...about someone to whom they can relate and is facing a significant problem.

In order to tell stories that your prospect can relate to, you need to have a system and structure. Most people just make up their stories on the fly.

I then launch into my story about how I am the son of a university professor, thus the college application process was an enormously big deal in the Satterfield household. I talk about the two schools I did not go to: Princeton (they did send me a very nice letter, something about "in the unlikely event that Hell does freeze over, we would be happy to reconsider...") and UCLA (which Dad put the kibosh on because, as he said, "I think you'll become a pretty good surfer but flunk out your sophomore year"). Washington University in St. Louis got on the radar from Dad's perspective because he was originally from St. Louis, and on mine because, unbeknownst to Dad, it offered coed dorms (quite the attraction to an 18-year-old in 1973).

I tell this story, which takes about eight minutes. At the end I ask the audience members to take out a piece of paper and write down the name of the school I went to. After they've done that, I ask them to write down the names of the two schools I did not go to. I then ask them to turn over the piece of paper.

I leave the story at that point and go on. Undoubtedly, some in the audience wonder why I felt compelled to share my college application process.

Near the end of the presentation, I revisit the story. I ask the audience members to find the piece of paper on which they wrote down the names of the schools but not to turn the piece of paper over. I direct them to write on the back of the paper the name of the school I went to. After a minute, I then ask them to also write down the names of the two schools I did not go to.

Here's what happens and why this is important: 95 percent of the group gets the three schools correct the first time I ask them to write them down. Those who don't are usually the ones who weren't paying any attention at all, and you always get few of those in any group. But here's where it gets interesting: a whopping 80 percent of the audience is usually able to correctly identify the three schools at the end of the presentation (about 45 minutes later).

So what's the point?

The “where I went to college” story was developed to illustrate that *people don’t remember facts, they remember stories*. One of the key selling points to my Unique Sales Story training program is that most salespeople get their best clients through referrals, but they wish they had more of them. I believe that the reason people don’t get as many referrals as they want is because they’re not top of mind. How they describe what they do isn’t memorable; it’s too filled with facts. By learning to use Unique Sales Stories, you can dramatically increase the number of referrals you receive.

I need to get my audiences to buy into that premise if they’re going to hire me to do training. So how can I accomplish that? Well, since I’m in the business of storytelling, I certainly should tell a story about that.

Now, I could tell a story about how a salesperson used stories and increased his referral rate by 50 percent. That would be effective. But it would be even more effective if I could get my audiences to reach that conclusion on their own, hence the story about where I went to college. Asking people to recall the schools I applied to is a tangible demonstration of the power of stories.

So the very first step in creating that story was to determine the point I wanted to make. That’s crucial, and it’s often the key differentiating factor between stories that captivate and those that bore. In fact, you’ve probably asked yourself, “What’s the point?” when a story seems to meander off into the netherworld.

It’s one thing to understand that sales stories are a powerful tool; actually being able to *communicate* stories that captivate prospects and motivate them to take action is an entirely different challenge. Like everything in life, the more you practice, the better you get at communicating sales stories, so hopefully I have given you the framework to get started.

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*If you would like to receive an overview of the Unique Sales Stories Sales Training program or to speak with Mark directly, please send an email to [mark@gentlerainmarketing.com](mailto:mark@gentlerainmarketing.com).*