SUCCESS-FULL STORIES

BY EMILY SOPENSKY

Storytelling is as important to a company's success as are a good product, marketing, advertising, and even maintaining employee morale. Getting visibility for a company and its products almost always includes sharing success stories. Such stories explain why the technology is important without having to make a "gearhead" of the reader; for complex technology, stories are a godsend. Sharing a story of how a company solved a client's problems is important in establishing credibility and rapport with both new and repeat customers.

Because ...

Whether you're selling office supplies or complex planning software, telling a story is important to the health and wealth of your company for several reasons:

- The more complex and technologically advanced the product, the more important the story is in demonstrating how the product works. Such stories can show how the technology is applied to solve a problem in a new way. For example, do I care what radio frequency identification (RFID) is when I'm breezing through the Dallas Tollway without having to stop? The technology is not as important as what it does, how it is used, and who uses it.

- Does the technology make my life easier, simpler? Yes! I don't need to scrounge for quarters while driving, slow down to throw them into the coin machine, or come to a complete stop while an attendant makes change for me. RFID is the technology underlying electronic toll collection—the same technology used to time the Atlanta Olympics marathon.

- Case studies, application stories, and scenarios are important for sales at all levels. They provide examples that can be reviewed, emulated, and even repeated. Such stories provide something memorable for customers, prospects, and your own salespersons.

Stories must be both interesting and true.

- Company lore and legends are based on successes. Although the sheer number of companies that were "started in a garage" or "begun in a spare bedroom" sometimes dilutes the impact, such stories nevertheless build employee morale and establish tradition.

The Steps

To develop a useful success story or case study, follow these guidelines:

1. **Determine the purpose** of your success story and how it is going to be distributed. If your complex technology affects different markets, you may want to have more than one version of the story. Together or separately, the stories can be used in sales literature, press kits, and advertising, and they are particularly appropriate for "advertorials" as well as being the basis for scenarios in training exercises.

2. **Identify the stories to be told.** Choose stories that fold into your marketing or training plan and reflect the industries you are targeting. For example, if you are targeting the banking industry, a story about clients in the entertainment industry may be amusing but does not make your point effectively. Find interesting stories that are true.

   A stranger who comes into your store and plops down $10 000 for a slew of home improvement tools can be an interesting story, but only if you find out why. Making up a story may get your point across initially but if it's not true or representative, you lose in credibility what you may have initially gained in sales. When you involve your customer, a fact-checker must be able to come up with a clean slate.

3. **Get agreement from the customer** whose story you are going to document. This is a crucial step. Although you may have a great relationship with a customer, that does not necessarily

mean they want to share this success and their company's name in print—especially if they have no control over the outcome. Assure your customer that the story will be used only after company approval. Determine who has final authority:

4. **Outline the ingredients** that make the story unique but interesting. If you have direct experience with the customer's problem and how your company helped solve it, sketch this out yourself. Otherwise, have the account executive give you the essentials of what happened. It helps if you know the customer's criteria for making the decision. What were the reasons that compelled the customer to chose your company's solution?

5. **Write a succinct, compelling story.** There is nothing worse than a great story told poorly. Being able to tell the story is just as important as getting the right information. Be sure your writer can write the story accurately *and* interface with the client without overtaxing the client's resources. A note of caution: A colorful writer, who has a tendency to exaggerate, may be the next blockbuster novelist but might be extremely poor in maintaining good relations with your customer. Or a very techni-

cal writer might get carried away with the details.

Be sure to get the facts right and make the story flow. Cover the problem, the process of resolution, the decision, and the solution. Quotes from those directly involved in the process make the story real and tangible.

6. **Get approvals.** This is the formalization of step 3—and frequently the hardest step. Some larger companies are notorious for their anti-litigious nature, which means you have to run through a gauntlet of protectors. Understand that this can go exceptionally quickly or exceedingly slowly, depending on your clients and you and your company's relations with them.

7. **Distribute the story** based on the plan in step 1, but don't forget to first let those who contributed to the story see the final product.

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LOOKING FOR INTERNATIONAL, INDEPENDENT WRITERS

e'll be adding a column to the *Newsletter* this year about the business of being a technical writer or editor in business for oneself. It will cover such issues as finding and keeping clients, building a portfolio, dealing with isolation, setting fees, negotiating contracts, paying taxes, and the differences between contracting and consulting. The author will be Julia Land, who has been an independent technical writer for more than five years.

We don't want the column to be just about being independent in the United States. We'd like to add an international perspec-

tive by recruiting independent writers from other countries. These writers would participate in e-mail conversations with each other and with Ms. Land so that the column can reflect the realities of working independently outside the U.S.

Do you live or work outside the United States? Have you made your living for at least a year as a freelance technical writer? Do you have a few non-billable hours you'd like to contribute to this project? Or do you know someone who may fit that description? If so, please communicate with Ms. Land at *julia_land@ieee.org.*