

## CHAPTER 1

# It's all about connection

When I was growing up, I used to catch the train to Sutherland Library in the southern suburbs of Sydney after school, where I'd wait for my father to pick me up when he finished work. I used to love hanging out at the library. I wish I could tell you I spent my time reading the encyclopedia because I wanted to be a rocket scientist or devouring literary classics so I could become a great writer. But that would be stretching the truth—in fact, it would be nowhere near it. My love for the library was not so . . . intellectual.

As soon as I set foot in the library each day I would head over to the magazine section, where well-thumbed copies of teen magazines were in abundant supply. I'm talking about the magazines for girls who were obsessed with celebrities, boys, fashion, boys, makeup, boys, TV stars, being cool at school and, oh, did I mention boys? I was in heaven.

My parents were very proud because they thought their daughter was studying hard enough to get into Mensa. In reality, I was becoming an expert on the *really important things* in life, like what Jon Bon Jovi

liked to eat for breakfast, how to get rid of blackheads, and when it was okay to wear legwarmers. (Note: I learned much later in life that the answer to the last was 'Never'.)

It wasn't just about the celebrities, beauty and fashion. I also loved reading the articles about real people. At the time, the teen magazines featured inspirational stories about young women who were making it big in sport, music or some other chosen field, or who were on the road to recovery after struggling with an eating disorder. And, of course, there was the obligatory story about the girl-next-door who was spotted in a shopping mall by a talent scout who set her on the path to becoming an international supermodel.

When I wasn't wondering when this was going to happen to me (in case you're interested, that talent scout never did tap me on the shoulder), it was the magazine stories about other readers that had me most riveted. Because they were about other people, just like me, these stories played a huge part in helping me make sense of the world around me.

Look, I don't pretend this is where I came to understand the intricacies about the conflict in the Middle East or how the International Monetary Fund's decisions affected the global economy during the '80s. But it's where I discovered how other people saw the world and how they dealt with their problems. It made me wonder what I would do in a similar situation. It was through these real stories that I learned about friendship, sexuality, dating, nutrition and much more. It was also through stories about real people that I learned about different career choices beyond accounting, law or medicine—the only three careers that ever seemed to be discussed in our household.

As an only child, I didn't have any brothers or sisters to compare notes with. And while I had loving parents, we weren't the sort of family that had big conversations about issues or emotions. We were more likely to be watching *The Price Is Right* during dinner than debating politics or telling stories.

As I grew up, my reading transitioned from teen magazines to everything from *Vanity Fair* and *The New Yorker* to Australia's *Good Weekend*. While some of my girlfriends would pore over fashion magazines, coveting the latest handbag from Gucci or Hermès,

I would get lost in the feature articles. I loved nothing more than letting the writers take me on a journey into someone else's world, where I would learn about their joys, pains, struggles or quirks. Two thousand words later, I felt just that little bit richer through knowing their story.

This is where I developed my love for the written word and my love for stories. I know it would be far more romantic and dramatic to say that it was Shakespeare, George Orwell or J.D. Salinger who ignited this passion. But the truth is it was the glossy pages of these magazines that nurtured my love of reading and writing through real stories about real people.

Don't get me wrong. I loved to be absorbed in a novel or movie. I used to be in awe of the imagination of the writers who could create believable alternative worlds like Tolkien's Middle Earth or Isaac Asimov's spellbinding future visions, or larger-than-life characters like F. Scott Fitzgerald's Gatsby. Some of these stories moved me to the core. Yes, I cried while reading the last few pages of *Hamlet*, and I was determined to fight prejudice after reading *To Kill a Mockingbird*, but I was also inspired to take up boxing thanks to the tales of Rocky Balboa. These stories—in books or movies—were all created from someone's imagination, and they were no less powerful than real ones.

But there was something about real stories that just resonated with me. If they could happen to other people, they could happen to me. So I found them endlessly fascinating. It's no surprise that I eventually became a writer and journalist. I loved unearthing these stories: discovering the passions, struggles, setbacks and triumphs in other people's lives—and I loved to write about them in a way that could inspire others, or at least help them make sense of what may have been going on in their own lives.

The part that excites me is not the act of putting words on a page. It's not about getting the structure of a sentence right, or ensuring the right adjectives or nouns are used in the narrative. Those are just some of the technical steps to achieving the ultimate goal, which is fundamentally about connection. Connecting with another person. Your aim might be to inform, entertain, inspire, educate or motivate. But, ultimately, it's about connecting with another human being—simply by telling a story.

## Once upon a time ...

Stories are a fundamental part of human existence. They've been around since the beginning of time. Long before there were newspapers, water coolers, books or blogs, stories were simply shared around the campfire, at tribal gatherings or through pictures on cave walls.

Sharing stories is one of the most natural human instincts we possess, and it's fundamental to the way we communicate. Throughout the ages, humans have used stories to explain phenomena, convey information, record history and make sense of our own and others' behaviour.

Cavemen used pictures to tell hunting stories. Before writing evolved as a tool to record and communicate, storytelling was the only way we preserved history and ensured our rituals and practices continued through generations. Egyptians told stories through hieroglyphs carved on walls or written on papyrus. Sometimes these stories recorded facts, but not always.

People have always told stories to explain the unexplainable. That distant rumbling in the skies that eventually turned into an 'oh we're going to die' boom overhead? Long before our ancient forebears rationalised the concept of thunder, they created stories about the god of thunder. And those yellow and orange flames that flickered into life when we rubbed two sticks together? Well, they too were explained by a mythical deity that could create fire. Superstitions, traditions and rituals often have their origins in stories.

Stories stand the test of time. The Greek poet Homer is thought to have composed the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* around the 8th century BC, and these great epics are still studied today. Great storytellers such as Moses, Jesus, Mohammed and Buddha garnered both followers and fanatics as a result of their stories. Religious movements and philosophies have spread all over the world through the telling and retelling of their stories. Whether they are about the search for redemption or salvation, or sitting under a tree waiting for enlightenment, these stories work because in some way they connect with something inside us.

With the advent of the printing press, stories were no longer shared among small groups of people. Finally, these stories could be spread from one to many. The fairytales of the Brothers Grimm and Hans Christian Andersen are known to children around the world,

illustrating how powerful stories can be. They can be used to inspire or scare, to motivate or manipulate, to empower or dominate.

Throughout history people have embraced the power of storytelling, for good or ill. Adolf Hitler's rise to power can be partly attributed to his story, as told in his autobiography and political manifesto, *Mein Kampf* ('My Struggle'). Hitler knew how to use stories to his advantage, but he also encouraged book-burning campaigns to destroy the stories that ran counter to his own. China's Mao Zedong used stories both to galvanise, and eventually devastate, a nation. *The Little Red Book*, a selection of quotations from his speeches and writings, helped communicate the ideology of China's Communist Party. Britain's Winston Churchill, through his rallying speeches, used stories to bring hope and inspiration to a country facing the depths of war.

In today's digital world, companies and brands convey their stories in 30-second bites. Blogs, social media and other online sharing platforms have broadened the one-to-many model into potentially one-to-millions.

## **Why is storytelling so powerful?**

A story is so simple. But sometimes the simplest things can have the greatest impact. Throughout history we've seen the power of storytelling in action, but exactly what part of the storytelling process inspires or moves people? It's when we explore this question that we discover why stories reach our very core.

Stories can make or break whether you score a deal with a new client. They can be decisive in convincing a jury to convict someone or to set them free. They're powerful because they package data, logic and analysis into an easily digestible form—easy to tell, easy to remember, easy to understand and, ultimately, easy to share.

Let's say I'm looking after your cat while you're on holidays. If you tell me to give your cat some flea treatment, I'll understand your instruction intellectually. I may even remember to do it. But if you package that in a story about how you forgot to give your last cat his flea treatment, and he got a tick and went into a coma, I'll remember that, and I'm much more likely to make sure he gets his treatment! An instruction is much more powerful when there's a story attached to it.

Our brains absorb and retain stories more readily than lists of numbers or reams of data. A story packages an impersonal, forgettable series of facts and figures in a format that we can connect with, and that can be easily shared. It's hard to get people excited about lists or bullet points. But tell them a story and they're more likely to pay attention. They're also more likely to pass it on.

A story's strength also lies in its subtlety. Stories may be anecdotes, commentary, opinions. They may be chronicles of people, ideas and places. Yet their power can be far-reaching, even subversive. When you tell a story, you invite listeners or readers to draw their own conclusions. But tell your story well and you can shape what those conclusions will be. Good stories are powerful because they are not oppressive or didactic. Rather, they motivate or inspire others to feel and act of their own accord.

A story is much greater than the sum of its parts. It has information and ideas embedded within it, perhaps with facts, figures, dialogue and characters. Put together, they are no longer a collection of disparate elements. They can create a whole that has its own force, momentum and influence.

So what's happened to the art of storytelling recently? There's still a strong storytelling culture in the arts. Movies are as popular as ever. Books are still in demand, albeit the medium for reading is shifting towards a more digital experience.

But in the world of business and the workplace, it's a different story ...

## **The decline of storytelling**

Picture this. You're watching someone do a presentation at work. Or maybe you're in an audience of your peers at an industry conference. The presenter heads up to the lectern, introduces himself then starts his PowerPoint presentation. Now this scenario generally plays out in one of two ways. In one scenario, the presenter is a good storyteller who knows how to use a slide presentation as a useful tool to enhance his story.

*Please God, make it so.*

In the other more common scenario, though, the presenter's innate storytelling skills have been steamrolled by years of corporate conditioning, which means he's been brainwashed into thinking

that statistics, data, graphs and pie charts will engage and convince his audience.

*Oh no, another Death by PowerPoint. How long is it till lunch?*

Chances are you've experienced something like this. Your colleague or boss—who usually has no problem amusing you with stories at the company picnic or at Friday night drinks—turns into an autobot who seems capable only of reading directly from the PowerPoint slide.

*Word. For. Freaking. Word.*

And we're not talking about just a few succinct, telling words here. He appears to have copied massive chunks of text into the slide and inserted a few random bullet points because, well, that's what you do when you create a slide presentation, isn't it? He even says: 'I know you can read this yourself later but I thought it would be useful to put this on a slide for you ...'

*The man's a genius.*

This is invariably accompanied by an announcement that the slides will be available on Slideshare or can be emailed to all participants so you don't need to bother taking down notes from the mini-novel that has appeared on the screen.

*Because I'm just SO engaged in this presentation that I can't wait to download the slides and relive the experience in my own time later.*

Then this presenting genius, who may actually have a valid and wonderful story to tell underneath this slideshow, projects a series of graphs on the screen. After all, he just spent hours working in Excel to turn his raw data into a fancy line graph with different colours representing various cost centres within the company extrapolated over a five-year period. To top it off, he's overlaid a bar chart to compare these figures with industry benchmarks.

*I think I need glasses. Is it just me? Can anyone else see what's on the screen?*

The presenter explains: 'I know you won't be able to see the detail in this graph from where you are ...'

*Why in the world did you include a slide we can't... um... SEE?*

And with a click of the remote he moves on to the next slide: 'I know you can't see this next slide either, but I thought I'd include it anyway ...'

*What the...? Okay, that's it. I'm going to tweet a photo of the slide so everyone can see how ridiculous this looks.*

At this point he includes a mindmap that's supposed to offer an overview of the industry. It's impossibly complex, and uses a 6-point font that would require bionic vision to read, so you're simultaneously going cross-eyed and feeling nauseated trying to make sense of it.

*I wonder if anyone would notice if I snuck out of this presentation right now?*

He reels off more statistics, presents a few industry averages (accompanied with some cheesy clipart) and makes a statement (which you forget instantly) about why it's so important to embrace this strategy. He then wraps up with a closing slide encouraging the audience to connect with him on LinkedIn or Twitter.

*So you can then bore me witless in 140 characters? I don't think so.*

Where's the story? Where's the passion? What, in this sea of text and graphs, was supposed to connect with his audience?

It's not fair to blame this all on PowerPoint. In fact, PowerPoint can actually be a powerful tool to help you tell stories. But too often it's used as a crutch in order to *avoid* telling stories. This is because of the conventions we've been subjected to, particularly in the business world. We've been told that data is king. That we can't make any useful business decisions unless we have the data to support us. And lots of it.

The number crunchers who have to sign off on strategic business decisions want to see it in black or white—specifically in spreadsheets that can be manipulated, data-mined and turned into those all-important pretty graphs. They are the ones who chant: 'The numbers speak for themselves', when in reality the numbers tell only half the story.

They may believe that data and numerical evidence should have the final say. When it comes to influencing people, data might be king, but the ace up your sleeve is your story. Use the right data in a good *story*, and you have a powerful combination that can influence behaviour and, sometimes, change the world.

Data can convince the mind, but you need a story framing that data so that you can reach people's emotions and make them truly believe in what you have to say. It's not just the pathetic PowerPoint presenters that are killing storytelling in the workplace in favour of clinical numbers. In recent years, the explosion in online communication has also taken a toll on our storytelling abilities.

Remember when we used to go into stores and talk to sales assistants? You know, actual humans. Before eBay, Amazon and online shopping we used to talk to people in real life. Whether it was conscious or instinctive, they would tell us stories about the products or the difference the products or services made in the lives of other customers. And these stories shaped our decisions on whether or not to buy. Now, we have online shopping carts that list exciting information like:

Zamatek E350

1.6 GHz; AMD Brazos platform

2 GB 1333 MHz DDR3; 2 SODIMM

320 GB SATA (7200 rpm)

SuperMulti SATA drive and double layer supporting Everlight Technology

ATI Odeon HD 6310 (up to 256 MB)

20" integrated TFT panel

8 USB 2.0; 6-in-1 memory card reader

USB optical wired mouse; USB keyboard

Integrated 10/100 BaseT network interface (broadband ready)

HP wireless NIC 802.11b/g/n mini card

If you're a techie or a geek, this might actually mean something to you. But to the rest of us mortals, this is not what we would call riveting, or even useful, reading.

### ***Short but not so sweet***

Not only have we been conditioned to embrace this emphasis on numbers, data and quantifiable information in our working lives, but we've also become attuned to shorter communications, with abbreviated language and emoticons replacing meaningful exchanges.

OMG. LOL. ROFL. (*Oh my God. Laugh out loud. Rolling on the floor laughing.*)

Kthxbai (*Okay thanks goodbye.*)

Thx. IMHO u r awesome. GTG. KIT. (*Thanks. In my humble opinion you are awesome. Got to go. Keep in touch.*)

Okay, maybe you don't use these abbreviations too often. But look at the posts of any number of the 200 million Twitter users—or the chat history of any teenager and you'll see that this form of communication is the norm. Twitter limits your messages to 140 characters. When I'm trying to condense a long message so I can tweet it, I sometimes find myself sounding like an inarticulate idiot with the vocabulary of a preschooler. But this is the way many people are staying in contact.

Yesteryear's campfire gathering is today's Twitter stream or Facebook status updates. Real stories are diminished in these exchanges in favour of staccato pronouncements such as 'This is my favourite place for coffee' or 'Stop live animal export NOW!'

Comments on Facebook, which now has some 200 million users, don't reassure either. These typically fall into one of the following categories:

- 1 'OMG sooooo cuuuute!' Or a variation thereof, usually in response to a video of a kitten falling asleep or a Labrador puppy playing with toilet paper.
- 2 'Want!' See point 1.
- 3 'That looks yum! Enjoy.' A common response to a photo of a meal about to be consumed, regardless of whether it depicts carrot sticks or caramel cheesecake.
- 4 'That's awesome!' Typical response to almost any announcement, ranging from a new job to a new spouse—and everything in between.
- 5 'Yeah, that exactly what happens with my husband/girlfriend/son/teacher/boss/pet.' The kind of response you get when you post anything bemoaning the behaviour of any of the above.

Of course, these examples are by no means exhaustive, but they are an indication of the short, superficial nature of our communications these days. Our abbreviated communication styles have been exacerbated by the explosion of email in our inboxes. When email first came along, we responded to every one. We read every email we received and we felt that all the communication in our inbox was direct, personal, important.

Of course, this was long before we realised that all emails were not actually created equal. Alongside the emails from our friends

and family were the emails from organisations trying to flog their products. Maybe you once entered a competition to win an iPad or signed up for a free ebook (and in the process provided your contact details), or you 'liked' what looked like a fun group on Facebook (and gave them permission to message you).

In the old days, businesses had to think long and hard before embarking on a marketing campaign. It was a big investment to print newsletters, catalogues and brochures and then send them through the mail. But with the advent of email, marketers can email thousands—or hundreds of thousands—of people with the simple click of a mouse.

So email marketing was born. We suddenly acquired 'friends' touting everything from Viagra to Acai berries to timeshares in exotic destinations. And we've been fighting overflowing inboxes ever since.

### ***The attention span of goldfish***

We soon became immune to this explosion in emails, however. With a finger poised over the delete key, we scan the source or subject to see if the message's fate lies in the recycle bin or if it's worth our reading time.

Marketers now know they have a slim window through which they can capture our attention. So they've ditched long stories in favour of a short paragraph about their product or service because that's all the attention they expect from you. These marketers also have webmasters and graphic designers breathing down their necks, chiding them for writing anything that will end up 'below the fold' (that is, off the screen).

Experts tell us to keep our blog posts short because our audiences have the attention span of goldfish. So we need to get to the point. Not that there's anything wrong with getting to the point, but there's a time for brevity and there's a time for story.

Please note, however, the two are not mutually exclusive. You can tell powerful stories in a limited number of words, but most of us haven't honed this skill yet. Because in the past we never had to condense our lives into such short messages. So don't get me wrong. I don't think short messages are evil. In fact, some of the most powerful stories ever told have been short. When challenged to tell a story in only six words, Ernest Hemingway came up with:

For sale: baby shoes, never worn.

Of course, most of us mere mortals don't have Hemingway's master storytelling skills. So with the rise in emails and other methods of online communication, businesses have largely ditched the art of storytelling in favour of short, sharp marketing pitches to an increasingly jaded audience. It's like the difference between a long, romantic evening of passion and a brief encounter that ends prematurely. Oops, it's over before you know it.

### ***The evolution of journalism***

Another nail in the storytelling coffin, or at least a dampener on our culture of storytelling, has been the decline of long-form or investigative journalism.

Twenty years ago I remember savouring 3000-word magazine articles every weekend. Whether a feature on an Oscar winner in *Vanity Fair* or the story of a successful entrepreneur in *Forbes*, I relished reading these stories. I would set aside time, in the bath or with a glass of wine, to let the story wash over me. These weren't pithy tales that I could read while standing on a crowded train or during TV commercial breaks. They weren't the bite-sized stories we're now served about the latest chapter in the life of a Kardashian.

The reality is that budget cuts in magazines and newspapers all over the world have resulted in shorter stories and diminished word counts. At the same time, magazines are replacing text with pictures. After all, what's more engaging to a reader: a bunch of words describing Lady Gaga giving the bird to her fans, or the actual image of her doing it, complete with a wacky outfit and sneer of contempt?

### **It's the message not the medium**

The great thing about the art of storytelling is that it's platform neutral. Whether you are telling stories in print, movies, online or in a speech or conversation, the power lies not in the medium but *in the message*. This book focuses on the message. It will help you identify and shape the eight power stories you need to tell to grow your business. Once you're clear on what they are, they will give you a valuable arsenal you can reach into whenever you need.

You might call on a gentle story to inspire a team member into action, or a persuasive story to encourage a customer to buy, or a

memorable story to help you make headlines. This book will help you nail those stories.

In this book, I talk a lot about how entrepreneurs can use storytelling to grow their business. By entrepreneur I mean anyone who is a business owner, but I am also addressing anyone in charge of running a business. You might even be an *intrapreneur*—someone who drives change and innovation within a discrete business unit in your company. If that's the case, you too can use these tools. So feel free to substitute 'entrepreneur' with whatever term you feel best fits your own role. In this book you'll find examples of how other entrepreneurs use their stories from which you can learn to adapt your own.

The way you share your stories is totally up to you. I'm not about to dictate the medium you choose for your message. While some entrepreneurs love blogging, others prefer giving keynote speeches, and yet others are addicted to Facebook. You should choose the medium that suits you—and the people you want to reach.

So what exactly are we talking about when we refer to stories in a business context anyway? Do we have to pull someone aside so we have their undivided attention before we launch into our tale? Of course not. Storytelling has come a long way since the days when you had to gather your tribe around the campfire to enchant them with the tales of your latest adventures. You don't need the captivating storytelling skills (and guitar) of Maria from *The Sound of Music* in order to settle your listeners so you can start your story from the very beginning.

Sure, storytelling in movies relies more on images, and a mesmerising speaker can make or break a speech. But both are, fundamentally, about the power of storytelling.

These days you can tell your stories through a wide variety of mediums, from a candid post on your blog to a one-on-one conversation. This can also include print brochures, YouTube videos, press articles, keynote speeches and, yes, Facebook statuses or tweets; or it may take the form of a much bigger story, encapsulated in your very own book.

### ***In that case, what exactly is a story?***

Well, if I was going to get all academic on you, I could bore you with multiple definitions of what 'experts' believe constitutes a story.

I could set out the subtle differences between these definitions and spend all day detailing the merits of each. But let's be serious, your eyes would glaze over. While the various definitions of 'story' may be important for those studying narrative structure and plot, there's no need to overcomplicate an otherwise simple concept. Let's leave that to the academics. You're an entrepreneur. You're busy! You want to get to the juicy stuff—that is, how to use your stories to grow your business.

When we talk about a story, we mean a true or fictional account of an event or events. Simple.

Throughout this book, you'll find stories as short as a sentence or paragraph, and you'll find others that go for pages. There's no hard and fast rule about how long your stories should be. But if you want them to be effective, they better be interesting and relevant to your audience.

The more your stories resonate with your audience, the more likely they will be remembered or shared. And, ultimately, isn't that what you want? When you find that other people are sharing and passing on your stories, that's when you're truly harnessing the power of storytelling to grow your business.

In the digital world there's no doubt that technology has affected the way we tell stories and communicate. The trouble is that in many cases today's technology has unwittingly dulled our storytelling skills. It's time to get them back. It's time to bring back the art—and power—of storytelling. Why? Because it can help you boost your business, increase your revenue and build a community of enthusiastic fans or customers.

If you don't think you're a natural storyteller, don't worry. The great news is that you don't need to study for four years to master the art of storytelling. Your storytelling gene is inside you waiting to be awoken. You were born with it. We all were.

You can use simple stories to grow your business, build your profile and get ahead of the pack. In the following chapters, you'll discover the eight power stories that you need to do this.

Are you ready to harness the power of storytelling?