

RAconteurs

728

ESTIMATED NUMBER OF CORPORATE
STORYTELLERS IN 2010.
ESTIMATED NUMBER OF CORPORATE
STORYTELLERS IN 2001: 11*

CAREER



THE WAY WE WORK

How Storytelling Spurs Success

Storytelling isn't just for old folks and kids. It can help you move forward in your career—both by showing what you've accomplished and by persuading employees to trust you. *By Vickie Elmer*

MARRIOTT INTERNATIONAL'S Ed Fuller loves to tell stories. One of his favorites is set at the Boston Marriott Copley Place in 1985, where he was general manager. Just a month after it opened, catering sales were \$300,000 below budget. "My career is lost," Fuller recalls thinking after a senior executive called and

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said, “I can’t believe it. Bill Marriott is beside himself.” The executive said he was flying to Boston and asked Fuller to dinner after “we deal with the problem.”

The “issue,” it turned out, was not what Fuller had feared. A Marriott family member had ordered clam chowder; it arrived cold, and the manager hadn’t handled it well. That—not the stumbles of a new boss—was what Marriott cared about. “If [the family] is treated badly, we assume the customer is treated worse,” said Fuller, now head of international lodging for Marriott International and author of a book of workplace stories, *You Can’t Lead With Your Feet on Your Desk*, due out next year.

Fuller uses that story—and others—to teach new managers about Marriott’s priorities: serving the customer well, and serving its chowder hot. He also uses storytelling to teach about career advancement, such as the tale of how he and another senior exec started as a security guard and waiter. “They want to see actual examples,” Fuller says, noting that 60% of Marriott’s hotel managers started as hourly workers. “Storytelling has made me more effective in doing my job.”

That sentiment is shared by executives at companies such as Microsoft and Pepsi, who use storytelling “to create a metaphor or an emotional boost,” said Annette Simmons, a corporate storytelling trainer and an author of two books on the topic. Irada Sadykhova,

Microsoft’s director of learning strategies, uses stories to open a meeting, to press for a new strategy, or to motivate a team. “It’s about imparting some sort of a truth,” says Sadykhova, who grew up on fables in Russia. And famous movie exec Peter Guber, who has written a book called *Tell to Win*, due in March, says stories are the best way to achieve your goals. “They’re not monologues,” he says. “You’ve gotta touch people.”

Stories can also aid hiring, says John Berisford, head of human resources at Pepsi Beverages. “I often ask one question, whether I’m interviewing a senior-level executive or a campus person: Tell me your story,” said Berisford, who learned storytelling from his grandmother in West Virginia. “It’s the best way to get to know the entire human being.”

To instantly grasp the impact of a good yarn, think of bestselling books such as *Fish!* and *Who Moved My Cheese?* The ones that work are instantly memorable and forge emotional connections, says Katharine Hansen, Ph.D., co-owner of the Quintessential Careers website. But that doesn’t mean storytelling is right for every situation. It can backfire if the teller is trying to build enthusiasm yet doesn’t feel it, says Simmons. Choosing the right story for your audience is crucial, as is editing it to be clear and concise. It also helps to be accurate; at a time when authenticity is scarce, no one wants to hear a tall tale. ■

ONE-MINUTE MENTOR

Will employers question your judgment because you spent too long at one company? **Allison Hemming**, president of the Hired Guns, a digital talent agency, offers tips to convince doubters.

Kill with the cover letter. To some résumé reviewers, a long stint at one company signals stagnation. Since you won’t be there to defend yourself, your cover letter needs to pop with terminology that’s of the moment in your industry.

Show you’re no career coaster. A chronological résumé that demonstrates strategic advancement within your organization is a must. Clearly highlight promotions, increased responsibility, and results—and make sure your LinkedIn profile is in sync.

Track your progress. Talk about each position scored at your current firm as if it were a great new job. Make sure to correlate your experience to the responsibilities of the role you’re going for.

Make no apologies. Have conviction in your decision to stick it out. Show how your company kept you engaged and challenged. Describe how the lessons learned will benefit the new company. Everyone likes a sure thing.

SELLING YOUR STORY...

Katharine Hansen, author of *Tell Me About Yourself*, on “career-propelling stories.”

- Start with “just one story” that reveals your essence.
- Show how you used your talents when tested.
- Tell of a turning point in your career and what you learned.
- Select stories that reinforce your personal brand and show your passion and personality.
- Tell how you developed or sharpened a key characteristic—and the results achieved.
- Show how you handle major change and lead others through it.
- Find hero stories where you saved the day.

...AND WHAT TO AVOID

- Don’t talk for too long or ramble. Two minutes is the absolute max.
- Don’t tell stories that aren’t relevant to a targeted job.
- Don’t lie or exaggerate.
- Don’t omit sensory details and a bit of color.
- Don’t forget to wrap up the story with a one sentence moral, key message, or lesson learned.