



Built-to-Last is Built on "Create and Serve"

Stories, Storytelling, Story-Selling in Business

Sometimes Truthfulness Doesn't Matter...

But Meaning Always Does

Tom Nies

Stories, Storytelling, Story-Selling in Business

Good stories fascinate us all. They always have.
They always will.

At this moment in our nation's history, we are seeing two epic stories evolving—in terms of our new President, and in the state of our economy.

The story of Obama many believe is epic, and certainly the story of our nation's recession and economic downfall is also a burgeoning epic tale.

Stories move societies forward. They inspire, engage and initiate change through their telling and re-telling. Basically, there are two types of stories: Truth Stories and True Stories.

TRUTH Stories

The first type, Truth Stories, are those that convey timeless messages and universal truths. Homer's Iliad and Odyssey were the first Truth Stories. These are the epic stories recounting the Trojan War and the journey of Ulysses. They were stories about heroes and their roles in epic events.

Originally the stories were only conveyed orally, sung by traveling bands for centuries, and in the process of communication, these stories were doubtless enhanced and extended. They also had many authors over the centuries, who often added their own small twist or turn to the original story.

The Message is the Point—Maybe Not the Truth

These epic tales were “Truth Stories” because they contained great moral lessons. Some of the content may have even been true, but including what's literally true into Truth Stories is beside the point.

The Message(s) is the Point—Not Necessarily the Facts

Achilles, Hector, Ulysses, Ajax, Paris, even Helen of Troy and the Trojan Horse may never have existed. Many have wondered whether Troy itself ever existed. And, even though there must have been a first initiation of at least some of the story, some wonder...

“Who was, or were, Homer?”

“Did he even exist?”

But what if the bigger question to be asked is really “Why does it matter?” In the case of Truth Stories, they are not dependent upon whether their characters, events, or even their author were ever true. Their real value to society and the culture is in the Truth, or the meaning, of their message and the lessons offered—not their truthfulness.

TRUE Stories

True Stories, by comparison, do attempt to tell what is literally true.

The first of these True Stories were history stories formally written (not told) by Herodotus. He is, therefore, known as the Father of History.

Begin with Inquiry

The word history itself gives us insights into their intent. The word history (historie) in Greek, of Ionian origin, meant inquiry. We may speak of Homeric epics, though there may never have been a Homer, but true history begins with historians. It is they who make the inquiries that uncover the facts that they report as histories.

[True stories] can become eternally admired, regularly quoted and retold stories.

From There to Eternity

Their stories are intended to be formally stated True Stories. Ideally, they may also contain eternal and universal Truths—or moral lessons. If so, they can become eternally admired, regularly quoted and retold stories as well.

Herodotus began his history with these words:

“These are the researches of Herodotus of Halicarnassus, which he publishes, in the hope of thereby preserving from decay the remembrance of what men have done, and of preventing the great and wonderful actions of the Greeks and the Barbarians, from losing their due mead of glory; and withal to put on record what were the grounds of feud.”

So, Herodotus formally wrote his history. That way, his history would not be subject to the ongoing changes that a verbally communicated message always tends to experience.

Why is This Important in Business?

Now more than ever, we are experiencing a story like never before, even during the time of the Depression.

Many of us are faced with layoffs and cutbacks and the stress of waiting for the other shoe to drop. We have CEOs each week in front of Congress asking for a bailout. Perhaps they are searching for a way, even while it's happening, to rewrite the ending to a story that seems so inevitable by all accounts.

The stories that last the longest are the ones that give employees, customers or our families meaning.

In the days of Homer, soldiers were known by their armor and the shields they carried. At present, CEOs are known by the failing bottom line numbers, how many jets they own and how many pink slips they're sending out.

The most prevailing story in our current situation is filled with lesser heroes and tentative, fragile deals that one can only hope will empower the economy and its workers.

No matter what the time, or the arduous challenges faced—in business, as in life—the stories that last the longest are the ones that give employees, customers

or our families meaning. They are inspiring, engaging roadmaps to follow for generations to come, because they bring meaning to what we all do.

How many of you have recounted a story once heard in business school about Jack Welch, or Peter Drucker? These stories, passed from professor to MBA candidate or CXO to CXO, remind us of the battles they fought and won against the competition, the naysayers and sometimes even their own clients and partners.

All Truth Stories are stories of the human spark of spirit, compassion, love and understanding. Those are the epic pieces of any hero's journey. Truth Stories contain great moral lessons. So do great company Truth Stories whose moral lessons were gained through difficult and arduous journeys in the marketplace, and with stockholders (in the case of public companies).

It was Bill Gates who said, "Success is a lousy teacher. It seduces smart people into thinking they can't lose."

Peter Drucker said, "Whenever you see a successful business, someone once made a courageous decision."

For real success in business, you have to be a supremely courageous communicator, and you must know what story you are building about your company.

Businesses need Stories, Storytellers and Story Sellers to succeed in the market. We've lost our idealism and hopefulness in this downturn and naively replaced it with quick fixes and denial about what is happening in our world.

The best communicators are the storytellers that grab you by emotion, seize your mind and prompt you to action. They take you on a magical journey, if only for a moment.

We've lost the ability to tell the epic story or the true story in exchange for more social media and less real handshakes over coffee. We've stopped sharing stories with our customers and clients, and are too often focused on only the bottom line and how it's dropping out.

Stories hold us
together in symphony
during battle.

A Vanishing Skill

Stories hold us together in symphony during battle, just as those battle songs held the Trojans together during their epic battles.

Unfortunately, the importance of the values and ideas of Stories, Storytelling and Story-Selling may not be as well understood by many of us. Nor may all of their many implications and possibilities be fully realized and appreciated by all of us to the degree they deserve.

Even during the most daunting times, stories held center court and helped buoy the spirit—in heroic efforts of battle *and* peacetime. Stories serve us through hard and lonely times. Stories resonate through all human beings in all cultures, and have throughout time.

Difficult Times Demand New Stories:

I believe that a good change of focus, a good use of our time—now, while we’re wading through the heroes and villains of the current economic downturn—is to revisit our stories.

When was the last time you took time to think about all of the events and experiences with which you may be involved, or have seen or heard about, that would make good stories to help your business?

Now more than ever, we need to be able to tell stories that will enlighten, inspire and empower our employees and our businesses. These stories too will serve to keep the spark of purpose lit for winning the battle.

You don't have to write them yourselves if you feel uncomfortable about it. Find someone in your company that will support your efforts. There are storytellers in your business somewhere, or your business wouldn't exist. Provide them with your story ideas. They can be True Stories or Truth Stories—though, ideally, they would be both.

Timeless and Timely Business Lessons: Our Stories

Having just marked a 40th anniversary in the software business, two of the lessons learned from our 40 years of business are timeless and timely—essential and eternal. Pathways through rugged and trying times.

I pass them on to you to, like Herodotus said, *“in the hope of thereby preserving from decay the remembrance of what people have done,”* but also so that they may help the reader as they pursue their own successful ideas and ideals for the next 40 years.

Long Ago and Far Away

Long ago and far away (from Silicon Valley anyway) in September of 1968, a radical idea for a new product and a new company was born in a Cincinnati basement—an idea that took seed with \$600, a card table, and a dream.

The challenges of the dream were daunting: create, market, and sell a product that one of the biggest companies in the world (IBM) was giving away for free.

No Product, No Customers, No Industry

That dream also included no venture capital; no one would finance it.

Why?

Because no one understood it. Software or softwear? What's that, clothing? One bank actually thought it was clothing. Why? This was seven years before Microsoft was founded in 1975. Nine years before Oracle was founded in 1977. And, this was in Cincinnati, Ohio, not Silicon Valley.

Forty Years Later?

Forty years of pioneering, advancement, and leadership in a turbulent and unforgiving software industry followed from this company and its employees. Governors, President Ronald Reagan, Former British Prime Minister Heath, the Smithsonian Institute and Harvard Business School among many other prestigious organizations have recognized their efforts.

Built to Last on Two Simple Concepts

The company? [Cincom Systems](#).

On September 29, 2008, Cincom marked its 40th year in the software business. Though the Cincom dream was daunting, risky and ,some thought, impossible, Cincom built that dream to last on two simple concepts: *Create* and *Serve*.

CREATE

Cincom employees create software and services products that solve real business problems, and they have been doing so since 1968. These products create customers.

SERVE

Serve the customers as well as the employees who create the products.

Peter Drucker said, “The purpose of a business is to create a customer,” and “The purpose of business is to create and keep a customer.”

Without customers, there can be no service. Without service, there will be no customers. Without our story over the last 40 years, we would not as easily remember how difficult the challenges were and continue to be.

I believe, that in most companies, what is required in the story is no longer just simply what Jim Collins termed, “Built-to-last,” but rather what companies must do is make their new stories’ foundations imbibe the message of “Create and Serve.”

Companies must choose to write new stories based around how they will create what works best for the customer, and then serve the customer’s story as well as their own.

Companies must choose to write new stories.

Companies must be willing to play a larger part in the success stories of their customers, not only in the singular success of selling a product or service to a customer. We all must work together to create new stories out of the current downturn.

These stories will be epic because they will be about leaders who did not travel to Washington in private jets, but rather leaders who stayed the course and, despite the challenging battle, worked hand in hand with their employees and customers to maintain the field and not lose their place in the globally competitive race.

Drucker said, “Rank does not confer privilege or give power. It imposes responsibility.”

What stories will our employees tell of our bravery in the face of all that has fallen? Will they be stories of epic proportions, or stories of retreat?

“A generation of men is like a generation of leaves; the wind scatters some leaves upon the ground, while others the burgeoning wood brings forth—and the season of spring comes on. So of men one generation springs forth and another ceases.” -Homer, The Iliad

Then Ulysses said to his companions, “Be brave, my friends, for the time is come for us to be delivered from this prison.”— Homer, *The Odyssey*

What will be your company story be in the decade to come?
Will you take the challenge and start writing it today? 📄

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Thomas M. Nies is the founder and CEO of Cincom Systems, Inc. Since its founding in 1968, Cincom has matured into one of the largest international, independent software companies in the world. Cincom's client base spans communications, financial services, education, government, manufacturing, retail, healthcare, and insurance.

SEND THIS

[Pass along a copy](#) of this manifesto to others.

SUBSCRIBE

[Sign up for our free e-newsletter](#) to learn about our latest manifestos as soon as they are available.

BORN ON DATE

This document was created on February 11, 2009 and is based on the best information available at that time. Check [here](#) for updates.

ABOUT CHANGETHIS

[ChangeThis](#) is a vehicle, not a publisher. We make it easy for big ideas to spread. While the authors we work with are responsible for their own work, they don't necessarily agree with everything available in ChangeThis format. But you knew that already.

ChangeThis is supported by the love and tender care of 800-CEO-READ. Visit us at [800-CEO-READ](#) or at our daily [blog](#).

COPYRIGHT INFO

The copyright of this work belongs to the author, who is solely responsible for the content.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs License. To view a copy of this license, visit [Creative Commons](#) or send a letter to Creative Commons, 559 Nathan Abbott Way, Stanford, California 94305, USA.

Cover image from [iStockphoto](#)®

WHAT YOU CAN DO

You are given the unlimited right to print this manifesto and to distribute it electronically (via email, your website, or any other means). You can print out pages and put them in your favorite coffee shop's windows or your doctor's waiting room. You can transcribe the author's words onto the sidewalk, or you can hand out copies to everyone you meet. You may not alter this manifesto in any way, though, and you may not charge for it.