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## THE POWER OF STORY

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As attorneys, our “output,” orally and in writing, predominantly is confined to providing information, offering counsel, or engaging in advocacy. Regrettably, I believe that we have lost intimacy with one of the most powerful communication types - storytelling. In reconnecting to the power of story, I believe we can become more effective communicators, not only as counselors and advocates, but as colleagues, friends, family members and fulfilled human beings.

Stories are how humans have communicated through the millennia. They are how we know our heritage, our culture and our perceived place in the world. Your sense of self is a narrative composed of the myriad of stories that you remember, were told or made up to support your desired image. Stories invoke power beyond the sum of the facts that they report. They include emotional content, contextual framework and wisdom reaching far beyond rational analysis. They are as close as you can get to taking someone else for a walk in your shoes.

Stories allow the listener to experience something that cannot be communicated any other way. Consequently, stories are “more true” than the facts they contain, because they are multidimensional. They fold together different realities and allow us to perceive in a new way - connecting people. Simple stories can convey deep truths. A Turkish proverb offers that: “To speak is to sow, to listen is to reap.”

Storytelling includes three components: the teller, the telling and the listener. Powerful stories access three intelligences: cognitive (head), emotional (heart) and somatic (body). The art lies in weaving the components and intelligences together. Research has shown that in oral communication, only 7 percent of meaning is attributable to the words. Tone, speech rate, rhythm and emphasis account for 38 percent of meaning. Gestures and facial expressions convey the remaining 55 percent.

How do these components and intelligences combine to create “story power?” I offer three neuroscience metaphors. First, stories are synesthetic, that is, they appeal to more than one sense at the time. A synesthetic individual may hear music, but concurrently see colors associated with it. A good story, in addition to the information conveyed, triggers visual or auditory senses, or invokes a smell or a body sensation.

Second, when in the company of others, humans are not a “closed loop” system. Rather, through limbic brain resonance, we are constantly dancing in physiological and emotional relationships with others. So while we may believe that we are regulating ourselves, others actually are participating in that regulation with us. A story is like a companion.

Third, and related, is the system of mirror neurons. These neurons fire in our brains when we are observing someone else in action. Likewise, many of our actions are mirrored in the brain by those around us. A powerful story can become something that the listener emulates. Even though no one is present, a story can evoke a response from us as if someone else were present and acting.



**Timothy A. Tosta**

*Partner*

415.356.4623

ttosta@luce.com

[www.luce.com/timothytosta](http://www.luce.com/timothytosta)

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In our work, our communications are focused, almost entirely, on the cognitive domain. As a consequence, they utterly fail to reach the emotional and somatic domains from which decisions are typically made. Facts and arguments alone cannot create story. It is up to the teller to weave those facts and arguments into something powerful that allows for a deeper connection with the listener. As T.S. Eliot said, "At the end of all our exploring we will arrive to where we started and know the place for the first time." That exploring is what stories do.

An archetypical story consists of: a starting point - status quo; change - drama; a turning point - climax; and the aftermath - denouement. Throughout any engagement, consider that you are working to "make" story. How will you tell the story of what has happened in the past, of what presently is going on and what a future outcome might be?

How do you create powerful stories? In the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Self trust is the first secret of success." Remember, truth is more important than the facts. The truth is what you "know" in your gut as much as your mind. Find the truth first, and notice how the facts support it. As a storyteller, see and hear like a child. The simple story resonates with greater truth. Take your experience and make it the experience of your listener.

To tell an effective story you need to know your intention in its telling. You must want to engage, to connect, to evoke your listener's curiosity and to persuade. What is the most important thing for your story to convey? What is the next most important thing? Who are the appropriate characters? What are the relevant actions? How clear can you make the experience?

You must also know your listeners. What do you know about your intended audience? How does that help you make your story connect? How are you inviting the listeners into the story? What offer are you making to them?

There are substantial differences between written and oral conveyance of story. Writing, in some ways, is a highly constrained medium. It is more difficult to engage the emotional and somatic intelligences. You have to make do with words, punctuation, typography, and, possibly, pictures. Writing is linear. You start here and proceed to there. However, it does allow the opportunity for immediate review. Oral storytelling allows you to use tonality, gestures, posture, and expressive facial behavior. You can use pacing, pauses, rhythm, volume, and tempo for emphasis. You are constrained by time and once you have spoken, the words are gone. But, you do have the advantage of establishing intimacy through a spatial relationship with your listener.

Be conscious of the strengths and weaknesses of your medium. A written story may vary considerably from the same story orally delivered. If your story can be both written and orally delivered, use the synergies available from the strengths of each. But, always speak in one voice. Appeal to all five senses. Think in scenes. Trigger images in the listener's mind. Never underestimate the power of metaphor. Metaphor opens the door to new perceptions of reality. Read your story aloud. Is it musical or cacophonous? Consider your pacing. Create "pauses" in your writing. In oral presentation, leave room for silence. Create room for your message to be understood. Be specific, concise and evocative. Use humor, if appropriate. It is a powerful persuader, emotionally and somatically. Build in appropriate repetitions, in the nature of a musical refrain.

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Powerful storytelling takes practice, practice and more practice. Don't memorize it, own it. Storytelling requires a grounded presence, a desire to connect with the listener and access to all three intelligences. So when preparing, relax your body, release your habitual tensions, and assume an open posture.

Finally, always pay attention to the story your actions tell. Your story can never be true if you or your characters act contrary to it. Storytelling is at its best when the story cannot be separated from the teller and when it creates resonance between and among the intelligences of the teller and the listener.

Begin your practice now.

*Timothy Tosta is a partner with Luce Forward's San Francisco office, specializing in land use law. He blogs at [www.coachingcounsel.com/blog](http://www.coachingcounsel.com/blog). He can be contacted at 415.356.4612 or [ttosta@luce.com](mailto:ttosta@luce.com).*

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