

HOW TO TELL A GREAT STORY

By Ross Shafer

WHO SHOULD READ THIS ARTICLE?

I am writing this for motivational speakers who want to find an endless supply of stories they can use to encourage other people. I include in the list of "motivational speakers," professional orators, pastors, priests, rabbis, attorneys, teachers, professors, lecturers, salespeople, parents, and anyone else who intends to influence behaviors by the words they speak.

STORIES: OUR MOST PERSUASIVE INFLUENCERS

Stories are examples of success (and failure) told in a compelling, repeatable way. Before we had writing instruments or carving tools to record adventures on cave walls, telling stories amongst each other created cultural rules, mores, beliefs, and the behaviors necessary to sustain villages, cities, states, and nations.

YOU WILL NEED A MULTITUDE OF STORIES

If you become one of the world's best motivational speakers your audience will want to bring you back again. Yikes! They probably don't want to hear the same story again. How will you come up with new stories? In this article I will talk about how to harvest an endless supply of motivational speech topics.

REMEMBER, STORIES MUST A STRUCTURE

You've heard it before but if you want to be great storyteller, I'll repeat the basic structure of any powerful story:

The Beginning. (What is the problem you are trying to solve?)

The Middle. (What is your plan to accomplish your goal?)

The End. (What is the resolution? Did you win? Or, did you lose?)

The easiest way to remember story structure is to think of any great movie you've seen. In every movie there is a protagonist (hero) and a villain (antagonist). The hero is trying to accomplish something (win the girl, rescue the family, find freedom, earn money to buy something, escape death, etc.) The antagonist is trying to stop the hero. Your story will be more successful with an audience if you tell a story of triumph over impossible odds.

Oh, and your story can't be boring. Your story must be an adventure filled with impossibilities, traps, suspense, impending disaster, and finally...a victory! You want an audience to sit on the edge of their seats while listening to you. More to your career goals, you want somebody to pay you to tell *your* story. The client's mission is that every motivational speaker is being paid to inspire their people to

learn from *your* trials. Both you and the client want the audience to hear your story and believe, if they follow your example, they can win too.

ABOVE ALL, RESPECT YOUR POWER AS A MOTIVATIONAL SPEAKER

If you are a charismatic speaker (or leader) who is developing a fan base, please be discerning about the methods and tone in which you choose to employ in the telling your stories. You have tremendous influence over people who are looking to you for answers. Let me explain. Years ago, I went to a highly guarded location to interview Jim and Tammy Faye Baker. They had just been ousted from their vast PTL Empire for the misuse of church funds; including the commission of a reputed 14k gold doghouse. In a small Palm Springs residence they told me how none of the wild allegations were true and that they were in hiding unable to support themselves.

I didn't believe them. Why?

Not even six feet from us were five women seated at folding card tables. These women were busily opening envelopes that were stuffed with cash and checks destined as donations to their ministry. When I mentioned what I saw on-camera what I witnessed off camera, their answer was, *"Those funds are from loving people who don't have anyone else. We use their money to support them spiritually."* This made me a little sick to my stomach because as a business author and motivational speaker, I am scam-averse. I don't ask for donations or ask my audiences to believe in something that could hurt them physically or financially.

Listening to Jim and Tammy Faye convince their followers that they are "homeless" yet still collecting money in order to follow their teachings, is what disturbed me about Anthony (Tony) Robbins and what happened in Dallas a few years ago. That day, fifty people were burned and five were hospitalized because Tony urged hundreds of attendees to walk on red-hot coals. Tony wanted to prove to his disciples they could overcome their pre-conditioned fears. And just how do you get hundreds of people to do that? Charisma, Peer Pressure, and crowd manipulation! Tony and his team were actually deriding his followers if they refused to do it.

But in my opinion the most dangerous motivational speaker EVER was James Arthur Ray, who in 2009, charged 50 people up to \$10,000 to come to his five-day spiritual warrior retreat in Sedona. And you know what happened? He built a sweat lodge that reached temperatures above 200 degrees. He told his followers that the sweat lodge would take their lives to the next level of transformation. Three people died that day and James Arthur Ray went to prison.

Look, there are some people who have tremendous charisma, and by the power of their infectious enthusiasm, the followers want some of that to rub off on them. As a motivational speaker yourself, be aware that you don't buy into your own charisma. Self-charisma can make some motivational speakers delusional. They get so intoxicated by the chanting audience they imagine, *"I just convinced a crowd of strangers to walk on coals" or "I got 50 people to get into a 200 degree sweat lodge, I must have a gift."*

The best motivational speakers I know are specialists. They motivate you to ignite your understanding, not your feet. As you choose your specialty, offer value

and takeaway tactics to help your audience. Make it your goal to cause your audience to feel comfortable and confident. If you can do that you will get repeat business for all the right reasons.

WHERE CAN YOU FIND AN ENDLESS SUPPLY OF NEW STORIES?

By paying attention to...*your life!*

I strongly encourage you to curate your life. Go back in time with a notebook. You have heard and been exposed to thousands of stories in your lifetime. You just forgot to write them down. It's not too late. What stories do you remember from your childhood? Who inspired you growing up? What can you remember about what they said and what you remember about their life lessons? What funny or inspiring stories are repeated at family gatherings? What events have happened to you that had a satisfying or maybe life-changing outcome. Who inspires you today?

BIG WALLY

Early in my motivational speaker life I was like you. I could tell stories about my business ventures and my life in show business. But I was searching my memory for motivational stories that would inspire other people. I kept coming up dry. Then, I reunited with a friend I'd played college football with and he reminded me of when our head coach would say, "*SO WHAT?!*" Why hadn't I remembered that?!

I played linebacker for the University of Puget Sound in Tacoma, Washington. Our head coach was this 6 foot five inch, 260-pound beast of a man named Paul Wallrof. We called him Big Wally. When Wally was fired up, Wally's voice could be heard in neighborhoods outside of our stadium. He was tough. He was demanding. He was relentless. And, we all loved him. Because when the other team scored a touchdown, Wally yelled, "*SO WHAT?!*" When the other team intercepted a pass he'd scream, "*SO WHAT!?*" If we were late to make a play, Wally didn't shame you, he grabbed your shoulder pads and bellowed, "*SO WHAT?!*"

Those are the two most motivational words I'd ever heard in my 19-year old life. "*SO WHAT!?*" was his rallying cry to put the past behind us and encourage us to move forward. If you lose a sale you were told was a sure thing, think to yourself, "*SO WHAT!?*" and move onto the next lead. If you missed a customer meeting because your calendar said PM instead of AM, that's a "*SO WHAT!?*" moment. You can't take it back but you can make it right the next time. How about a young coworker who blows an assignment that other people had to clean up. How motivating would it be if you approached that person and said, "*SO WHAT!?*" You will get the next one.

You see, none of our careers are judged by one misstep that slipped through the cracks. We should diffuse the situation with, "*SO WHAT!?*" It is far more meaningful to show people they CAN redeem themselves; to prove they are better than one blunder. Try Living the "*SO WHAT!?*" attitude in your own life. Don't beat yourself up by living in the past. Instead, learn and move on.

Do you want to know the lasting power of "*SO WHAT!?*" Recently, about 60 of us had a football reunion with Coach Wallrof...and these three decades later, those young boys who *heard* "*SO WHAT!?*" have become RESILIENT, SUCCESSFUL, MEN who never forgot the two simple words that have shaped our personal and professional lives. Thanks Coach.

ALEC BALDWIN

Sometimes the unexpected happens to you. Now, as a former network television talk show, I have been blessed to interview two U.S. presidents and countless influential world-beaters. However, a year ago, I had the last minute opportunity to interview the actor and activist, Alec Baldwin. I had been a long-time fan of his movies but as I dug into researching him I became more fascinated with his rollercoaster life struggles. Right away, I knew I was going to meet one of the finest motivational speakers of my lifetime.

For one hour, we were center stage at the Las Vegas Cosmopolitan Hotel in front of about 2,300 software engineers. Alec has been an actor for over 30 years but is probably best known today for his visceral portrayal of President Donald Trump. So, it might surprise you that he is that rare six-figure + jet motivational speaker. I can attest that Alec is worth every penny of his fee.

Regardless of what you think of Alec's political ideology, or what you may have heard about his public temperament, to survive and thrive in the world's most unpredictable business (for three decades) makes him a poster child for resilience. In his 20's, a handsome Alec Baldwin got a role on the soap opera; *The Doctors*. That led to being cast in the prime time hit TV show, *Knots Landing*. It wasn't long until he became a leading man in movies like *The Hunt for Red October*, *Beetlejuice*, *The Edge*, and *Glengarry Glen Ross*.

However, when his storybook marriage to super-actress Kim Basinger crumbled, the five-year custody battle over their daughter devastated his health and his career. Alec admits the exhausting courtroom drama and difficult travel demands to see his daughter drained the last ounces of his energy. He didn't have time to stay in his usual movie star physicality. The leading man roles were drying up and he fell from Hollywood's "A" list. He claims the pressure to make money and the relentless spotlight on his private life caused him to snap. When you are that famous, the press loves any opportunity to accelerate your collapse from grace. He was accused of assaulting a paparazzi and breaking his camera. News outlets aired it all over the world. Producers and directors chose not to work with Alec because they assumed he was trouble.

So what did Alec do? He faced reality and did every other thing he could. He took low paying theater roles. He took small supporting parts in movies like *Aviator*, *Cat in the Hat* and, *Pearl Harbor*, and *The Departed*. He worked for *Turner Classic Movies Essentials*. He became the radio voice for the *New York Philharmonic*. He took small roles on *Wil & Grace* and *Saturday Night Live*. He did credit card commercials for *Capital One*. Was this a huge step down for Alec? Not at all! He was doing what any other responsible father would do. He put his feelings aside and was out there making a living. What I admire about Alec Baldwin is that he never complained. He just worked harder. *Saturday Night Live* producer, Lorne Michaels, was so impressed by Alec's work ethic that he cast Alec in his new show *30 Rock*. The show was a hit and Alec's character, Jack Donagie, put him in high demand for movies like *Mission Impossible*, *Concussion*, and *It's Complicated*. Today, Alec does a fascinating podcast series called *Here's The Thing...* he hosts the game show *Match Game* (something he and I share in common) his Donald Trump impression has given SNL their highest

ratings in years. And at this writing, Alec now hosts an hour-long talk show on the ABC television network, *The Alec Baldwin Show*.

It is exactly this kind of work ethic and redemption story that makes Alec able to charge over \$100,000 per motivational speech. More importantly (for your study) is that Alec doesn't just show up to be the hand-shaking celebrity. Alec comes prepared to WOW an audience. He is an accomplished storyteller, comedian and impressionist. As a motivational speaker, he's an articulate raconteur and purveyor of seasoned advice.

None of Alec's initial success, mid-life failures, and recent career revival can be attributed to luck. He faces his shortcomings head on yet works hard on his strengths, every day.

DON'T LET YOUR PERSONAL CREDIBILITY STOP YOU

I go to about 70 meetings a year and I find a plethora of inspiring motivational stories wherever I go. I love to find people who are not paralyzed by their own limits. Like any great action movie where the hero escapes the villain, he or she always finds an alternative exit.

I was at the National Portable Storage conference last summer and I met an enterprising woman named Emily. Emily buys and sells large shipping containers...you know...the ones you've seen stacked on cargo ships. There is a huge 2nd life market to turn these containers into retail stores, construction offices, or a small on-site warehouse.

Emily's customers love her so much that many of them asked if she could also do moving and storage for them. Everyone is excited about finding demand for a new spin off business, but how was Emily going to be a "credible" moving and storage person when she didn't have any knowledge or experience. Emily's solution was simple and brilliant. She hired credibility. She found that there are over 2,000 Certified Moving Consultants in America. THEY have the experience and credibility, as well as knowing how to draw up contracts, how to sell, how to handle claims, and make sure the packing & loading process was safe and secure.

Emily contracted certified professionals and her new business had INSTANT CREDIBILITY.

So now, let's talk about you. If you are a motivational speaker (in any of the categories I mentioned in the opening paragraph) how can you sound credible about an area of expertise you lack. You find someone who has credibility and tell *their* story; like I just did just now with Emily.

COULD YOU SAVE A SINKING SHIP?

I have saved this story for last because it's really an adventure story.

The ship is sinking and the ship's petty officer steps forward with a bizarre idea to save it. The idea was so good, the rest of the crew decides to make this guy the Captain.

When I tell this as a motivational story to business audiences I reveal that this is a real-life story about a company – not a ship.

I ask them, "*Could you run a company if the serious threat of bankruptcy were looming? Could you reverse a disaster? C'mon, it's much easier for a leader to run a*

company when business is bright and rosy, but you need to be a leader who can face reality, jump into an unexpected firestorm, and rescue your company from market obliteration. A leader like that is the one who should cash big paychecks and sit in the big corner office."

Young Jon Vrabely is exactly that kind of leader. In 2005, Jon Vrabely was one of several vice presidents at Huttig Building Products, headquartered in St. Louis, Missouri. Their revenue was topping \$1 billion as they enjoyed serving what seemed to be an endless supply of materials to new housing starts.

As you know, in 2006, the mortgage crisis caused the bottom to fall out of the U.S. housing market; making Huttig a direct casualty. Huttig's revenues went from \$1.1 billion to about half that. As you can imagine, the board of directors were a little more than panicked. A lot of lame ideas were floated to save the company and yet there were still some people, who were totally oblivious. The CEO thought the market would eventually turn around. *"It is just a cycle."* Cycles are NOT a business plan. 41-year-old John Vrabely was the only one with the courage to explain to his senior leaders, *"This is a 125 year old company and Huttig's current strategy will kill us in a year."* He backed up his claim with a step-by-step plan to turn everything around. The board was so blown away by his bold approach (which was carefully researched) that they immediately replaced their long-time CEO with the 41-year old Jon Vrabely.

As the housing market continued to nosedive, Vrabely had no fear about systematically terminating old strategies. He wrote off two tech projects that represented a \$16.1 million investment because they were draining cash. He closed 18 of their 45 distribution centers. His toughest duty was laying off almost half of the workforce (about 400 people), many of whom were his friends. Vrabely said, *"I was NOT going to see this legacy company go under on my watch."* Yet, while he was cutting costs at Huttig, Vrabely also knew his competitors were hurting. So, Huttig aggressively went after his competitor's best talent, their product lines, and even bought a few struggling competitors at deep discounts.

It's been a long, slow road back. Since 2012, Huttig has added back approximately 200 people, sales have risen 8.1%, and the company is generating positive earnings. Jon Vrabely is the model leader who was brave enough to face reality – defy conventional wisdom – and even risk his own career by insisting his board of directors listen to the TRUTH.

Bravo to you, Jon!

STORY STRUCTURE ALWAYS WORKS

As you saw, the story structure keeps an audience interested. Using the Huttig example:

BEGINNING: Disaster looms for Huttig. They could go out of business if they don't change their thinking immediately.

MIDDLE: A hero emerges with a new, yet scary plan. It looks like the hero is putting his job and his company at great risk.

END: The hero's plan works. He rescues the company

TO SUSTAIN YOUR SPEAKING CAREER, YOU WILL NEED TO KNOW THESE DO'S & DON'TS

If you want to become a full time motivational speaker, I encourage you to take a look at the article I've written, "How to Become a Motivational Speaker." I wrote it for those of you who want to go from FREE...to FEE.

HOW TO BECOME A MOTIVATIONAL SPEAKER

<https://www.RossShafer.com/Articles>

ABOUT ROSS:

ROSS SHAFER is the preeminent keynote speaker on CHANGE & RELEVANCE. He has authored (9) business books, won (2) International stand-up comedy competitions, and earned (6) TV Emmys as a network talk and game show. He has also bought and sold 23 different companies. As a veteran of more than 2,600 keynote speeches, you might want to have Ross speak at your next conference <https://RossShafer.com>

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