

Business of Story Podcast with Keith Quesenberry - "Storytelling Wins the Super Bowl"

Park: Welcome back to The Business of Story. How is all your storytelling going on out there? We've had a number of fantastic guests leading up to this and hopefully you've been able to use some of their tips and techniques to bring more powerful storytelling to whatever you might be doing. It could be in a leadership realm, it could be owning a [inaudible 00:00:59] boardroom with a PowerPoint where you bring story to it. It could be brand strategy, brand activation. You can literally use story, story stretcher in all aspects of your personal and professional life and hopefully by now you're starting to hear some of that through Business of Story.

Today we have a really, I'm really excited about today's guest because we have Keith Quensenberry who not only has had over 20 years experience as an award-winning associate creative director and copywriter, but has done some really amazing research that we're going to talk about today. And how does story work in our lives and how can advertisers, marketers, brand strategists use it to great extent. Welcome to the show, Keith.

Keith: Hi Park, thanks for having me.

Park: Now, you are currently teaching out of John Hopkins University. So when did you make the transition from being in the industry to now researching, working in the industry and teaching others how to do it?

Keith: Yeah, that was about four years ago. I was working in advertising as a copywriter and then a creative director. And probably six to, well probably eight years ago, I started teaching part-time in the evenings at Temple University and found that I really enjoyed the teaching aspect. And then I started transitioning my way into full-time teaching and found that I really enjoy it and especially I like bringing in the new technology aspects to the classroom that maybe some programs have been behind the times in.

Park: New technology in the way of social media in that?

Keith: Social media, digital marketing, those types of things. Plus I can bring my real-life advertising experience and case studies and examples in, as well.

Park: I came across your work about a year ago. There was a terrific article in Harvard Business Review called "The Irresistible Power of Storytelling as a Strategic Business Tool." And what I found particularly interesting in it was the research that you did on Super Bowl commercials and those that rank very high and those that fell flat. And why that was of particular interest to me is, a couple of years ago, I think it was the 2013 Super Bowl, I'm watching the game and I'm watching all the commercials as all of us ad folks do to try to dissect them as they move along.

And I've got to tell you, I was pretty uninspired with about everything I saw until an Audi spot popped up. And there's a 60-second spot called The Prom Spot and it captivated me from the opening scene and it took me through, literally the entire hero's journey as if Joseph Campbell had written the spot. It just blew me away.

So I did a blog post about it. I dissected it. I talked about all the different chapters in it. I was able to find, it was created out of an agency up in San Francisco, Venables Bell and Partners. I had a chance to speak with their creative director there and ask them if they purposely followed the story structure to create it. And his answer was "No, not really. We're just simply innate story tellers."

And so what I took from that is all of a sudden this business has been given permission to be innate storytellers. But when it comes right down to it, when people that aren't so comfortable doing it are intentional about doing storytelling and using structure in it, that they can have a really amazing impact. And you've proven that with your study. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

Keith: Yeah, well, I remember that spot. But it's interesting that you bring that up because in advertising I was the creative. I was the guy trying to come up with the ads that everybody wanted to watch and not go to the bathroom during and those types of things. And I think naturally people that can tell stories kind of gravitate to those fields where that happens. But what I found was, we weren't intentional, we weren't as intentional about it as... I think it was hit or miss. Sometimes we would do a great story and other times we just try to do a funny punchline at the end of a spot. Or sometimes we tried to put animals in a spot.

It was kind of hit or miss and I didn't really know what worked and what didn't. So what intrigued me is when I transitioned from advertising full-time where you can't really sit back and analyze things. You don't have the luxury or the time to do that. You're always just working on the next project. When I became an academic, I could actually sit back and say "What makes the difference between the ads that work and that don't?" And I could do some research and actually start proving things like storytelling actually work.

Park: Were you already somewhat familiar with story structure or just, as you said, doing it innately and it wasn't until you started doing this research that you brought in the Freytag model and started seeing it come together?

Keith: Yeah, it was just something I was doing out of instinct over the years of crafting commercials and seeing what worked and what didn't. When I transitioned into being a professor, I wanted to do some research and I was thinking well, I'm going to do research on something that I'm knowledgeable about with TV ads. And then I decided, well everyone thinks that sex sells or animals or you have to have a good price point and all these rational benefits. You have to show the product. Everyone kept saying it's something different. So I wanted to do some research that really pulled out the underlying aspect that makes a really good TV ad.

And I happened to work at an advertising agency that ran a Super Bowl rating contest called Spotbowl.com. And every year we ran this contest, people voted for their

favorite spots and we were analyzing the commercials and I was on radio and TV and trying to figure out... everyone would ask me "What makes the good spots?" And I really didn't know. We were all guessing. So I wanted to do this research and find out. And honestly, what happened to me is, all these things were going on in my brain.

One night, I woke up in the middle of the night, and I always keep a pad and paper next to my bed and this thought came into my mind. It was "Shakespearean five-act play," burst it my mind and I wrote it down and then "Super Bowl ads." And that was the... and then I went and I started researching it. And I researched the five act structure, which is based on Freytag's pyramid which goes all the way back to Aristotle's poetics. And then we kind of put this study together.

Park: And when did you see it start coming to life within the spots? I mean, so you had this hypothesis that there's this story structure in these winning spots, but now you had to go and prove it out. What did you experience as you started watching these commercials?

Keith: Yeah, so what we did is... pretty much every year there's about 60 prime-time national TV commercials that air during the Super Bowl. They're the ones that they pay the multi-million dollars for the 30 seconds. So what we did was we collected those and then we trained some independent coders, they were grad students. An English grad student and a communications grad student, and we trained them on coding for identifying the five acts.

Freytag's pyramid is this five-act structure where you have the exposition, this is where you introduce location, the background, the characters. And then once you introduce everything, the second act is rising action. Something happens. The characters start interacting with each other, something happens in the environment. The story starts moving forward.

And then the third act is the climax. That's where all the rising action comes to this point where you don't know what's going to happen next. A decision has to be made. It could go very well or it could go badly for the main characters. And then once that climax happens, you have the falling action. And this is all the action that happens after the climax, whether it was good or bad. And then the fifth act is the dénouement, where everything is resolved and you have that little bow, that neat little bow put on the end of the story where all the loose ends are tied up.

We had these grad students just watch the commercial. We had no idea "Can you tell a full five-act story in 30 seconds 60 seconds?" We didn't know. But they went and we found out that you actually can. And then we compared the number of acts to the Super Bowl ad rating polls. We did Spotbowl.com which is the company I worked for, our rating. But we also looked at USA Today Ad Meter which is a very popular national one and we directly compared the number of acts in a story that was told, whether it was a full story or a partial story and compared it to the average rating.

So it's based on a scale of 1 to 10 or 1 to 5 and what we found is the results, the more acts, the more complete story you tell, the average rating went up. People rated the commercial more favorably. And then we had other research that tied favorably to

more views online, more shares online which can generate online buzz in all these other aspects.

Park: Can you give us an example of one of the spots that really did this very well in your study?

Keith: Yeah, and we did it over two years. So we compared, I think it was 2011 and 2012. And the same effect happened both years even though it was different commercials.

Park: And you looked at like, 108 commercials, or something like that.

Keith: Yeah, so we had, yeah... so there's roughly 60-some commercials each year. So we looked at 108 total, and this theory held up. Some good examples, actually this is a good example of the same company that got it and then they didn't get it. And this goes to my testament of when I was trying to create ads, it was hit or miss. Budweiser. Budweiser, every year they do very, very well with the Clydesdales. And you know the Clydesdales always tell a classic story and we fall in love with the Clydesdales and the story and what's happening and the puppy love, which was one of the more recent ones. So those always do well and when you code that they are always a five-act complete story.

One year they had the Clydesdale ad and it finished, I think it literally finished first. And then at the very bottom that finished, I think it was 60, 61, at the very bottom of the poll, they had a commercial where they were introducing a new aluminum bottle for Bud Light. And the whole spot, all it was, was the new aluminum bottle for Bud Light and it was spinning and they kept telling people how great the bottle was.

Park: Gratuitous, graphic movement.

Keith: Yeah, right. So there's no introduction of characters, or a situation, no rising action, no climax. Like, literally no story and it finished very poorly. And that's the same company that did that the same year.

Park: Oh, I hear you. Keith, when we come back after this sponsor message, I want to pick up on that thought because we've experienced that exact same thing and let's dive a little bit deeper into structure. But first let's hear a wonderful story from one of our amazing sponsors.

Welcome back to the Business of Story and our guest today, Keith Quesenberry, who has done some really amazing research on storytelling and Super Bowl commercials and what makes a good commercial work and what makes a very expensive commercial flop. Keith, we were talking a little bit earlier about Freytag's pyramid and the five-act structure of it. Does an advertising creative writer or just a business mind out there have to be steeped in Shakespeare to understand this structure and really use it?

Keith: No, I mean, this is what I'm trying to figure out is, we all know this as human beings because we're the ones who are attracted to stories. So it's a simple structure. And we tell stories everyday when you call up your friend or you run into someone at the store. You're telling stories all the time. And you're intrigued by them and you listen.

For some reason when we go to the office or we put on our business hat, we change perspective from what we know we like as a person to, "Well this is business and we have to be rational and we have to do all these other things." Perhaps, I don't know, perhaps there were things we learned in school that we shouldn't have been taught. We lose that perspective. This happens in TV commercials. This happens in pitches online and in social media. It happens in meetings. How many horrible meetings have you sat through with bullet points of awful information that makes you go to sleep? There's probably a really great story there, but the person's not telling the story.

Park: Keith, like you, I've been in this business a long time and I also teach an Executive Master's for Sustainability Leadership program at Arizona State University and I teach them communications and storytelling. So how they can turn their data and their jargon, the climate change world and sustainability into actionable stories. And from that I've created a presentation called "How Not to Become an MBA Zombie." and I present this to the MBA grads at ASU and we have great fun with it.

But I tell them, I say, "As soon as you get educated as an MBA, it seems it appears all of your humanity has been taken out of you and you can only think in data, charts, graphs and PowerPoints. And so when you show up in a boardroom you literally suck the living daylights out of that boardroom. And I'm going to show you how not to do that moving forward." It's simply reigniting that innate storyteller that is in all of us.

I think your road on this path of discovery is very similar to mine in that our middle son went to film school over in Chapman University, works in Hollywood now and is a motion picture graphics artist. And he's written his first screenplay and wants to be a director. He sent me all his books while he was studying it because I wanted to know, what did Hollywood know and of course that's when I was first introduced to Joseph Campbell and "The Hero's Journey."

And I saw the 17 steps to the Hero's Journey and overlaid it to the work we were doing in branding, brand strategy in creative development and boiled it down to this 10-step storytelling cycle that we have now found that we use that guides all of our thinking, essentially around creative storytelling development and brand strategy. And I try to even make that simpler by taking Freytag's pyramid and boiling it down to just a three-act story.

And I found our clients and those that I'm teaching in leadership are able to grasp a three-act story more than they can a five-act story and I think they have a lot in common. Have you seen any of that in your travels, that we've got to continue to simplify this for people to understand it and use it.

Keith: Yeah. Just to back-track a little bit, I think that my perspective also came out of... in my undergrad I was in the School of Communications and I took a lot film school classes and photography classes and journalism classes before I found my way into advertising. Those are all storytelling disciplines. So when I transitioned into advertising and marketing and business, I guess I brought that perspective with me.

We focused on the five-act because previous research hadn't dissected it into those nuances. So we wanted to look at it specifically because what we found is there are some people who... looking at the commercials, some actually just have one act and then they stop. And when we compare the data, we actually found that it does make a

difference. Even if you have two acts versus the full five, the favorability scores went up. So if you can understand the nuances of each of these, it can really help you have a more detailed argument and story to tell.

Getting back to, the way to understand this at a basic level, we're talking about multi-million dollar Super Bowl commercials and who has the luxury to do that? I think what it comes down to, we all have to make presentations and we start with that PowerPoint template with the bullet points and I think you just throw that away. Don't even get near the computer. You sit down, read over everything that you want to say and then just think of the story that you want to tell.

What do I want to introduce them to? Who are the main characters in this situation? What is the back story to what I want to tell them? And then where are we going? This is where we're at but where do we want to go and bring them along with the rising action of your company or your product or service. Bring them to this climax in the meeting. You've got to have this moment of expectation and then reveal something surprising. So many times, I work with my students and they give away the big surprise right in the beginning.

Park: They can't wait.

Keith: And then they give all the boring stuff. I'm like "You lost them." You got to take them along with the story. Build it up why this is the most amazing thing in the world. Surprise them with the solution and then you rush them down towards the end how everything is amazing and wonderful because of the solution you presented them. This all should be done on paper with a pencil.

Coming from my communications school background, just draw out little descriptions of what you want to happen during the presentation and do little thumbnails of visuals. Don't forget the visuals. Visuals are so important. Sketch out your little story on a piece of paper. Then go to the computer and start using tools, if you want. So many of us just get trapped in the PowerPoint templates or worse, we have a written document and we need to make a presentation and we just start grabbing words and flowing them in. That's not the way to make an effective story.

Park: Yeah, and that's the way I coach our students, as well. The first thing I ask them is "How do you want your audience to feel when you're done with this presentation? How do you want them to feel?" And they have to really think deep on that. Then the second question is "What do you want them to do after this presentation?" So you have to have this call to action and then once you've got that down you then go, "Okay, so what is the story, the meta-story that you're trying to tell in this overall presentation?" And to your point, do this all in pen and paper. Get away from the office. Get outside. Do something that gets you out of the business realm and get your mind out of being that zombie business person that has no emotion connected to what you're trying to deliver.

Then and only then start creating your outline, and in that too, and I'm sure you have found and I'd like to talk to you about this when we come back from the break, is about conflict. And how important conflict is to every story and why in business we seem to want to avoid conflict when that is truly the marrow to every great story. First, let's stop and throw it to another one of our incredible sponsors and we'll be back right after this message with Keith Quesenberry.

Park: Welcome back to The Business of Story and now we're going to talk about my favorite subject, conflict. Keith, why do we seem to leave out conflict in our business stories?

Keith: That is a good question. In conflict, I guess some people, personally, are adverse to conflict. They don't like it. It makes them uncomfortable. But it also you think, I'm supposed to be working with a person. We're supposed to be on the same page and when you have conflict it presents opposing views and disagreements and potential for negative energy. But if you think about it, what are your favorite stories, novels that you read? Your favorite movies? There's always conflict that leads to the climax when you don't know what's going to happen.

So if you don't have conflict, or you don't have a climax and then you have no story and it's not exciting. So any good story, the climax is the turning point where the main character's fate is up in the air. And also if you think about stories, you always have the protagonist and the antagonist and that's what makes the story interesting and pulls you along. If you have a protagonist and there's no one against them, there's no forces against them or a character against them, that's not exciting, right?

In any business you're going to have conflict. The conflict can be your competitors, the conflict, it doesn't have to be a person. It could be the challenges you're facing in today's economy, or in the shifting social media landscape and you've lost all your customers. How do you get them back to the store? The conflict doesn't have to be another person. It could be opposing forces. And you want to position your character and your character can be your company, your product, or your solution, your software, your system, or it could be your customer, the customer you won and you portray them as the main character who has a conflict against their problems and you're showing them the way to a solution.

Park: Yeah. You, the brand or the mentor, you're the Obi-Wan Kenobi to their Luke Skywalker, basically.

Keith: Exactly. Exactly.

Park: Well, you're talking about conflict too in Freytag's pyramid. Act two is called "Complication Arising Actions." We've all experienced this in our lives. We want something. We step out of our comfort zone to go and get it and we're thinking, "Maybe this won't be so bad," or "It's easier than I think." And then the universe conspires to push back and it basically keeps tapping us in the chest saying "How bad do you want this?" And that's where character development comes up.

That's where you see it over and over again in movies that the character wants to get something, the universe pushes back, they have to pivot and they move it ahead. They have to overcome all of these forces in order to level up essentially and attain what they're looking for. And we have transformation of character, transformation of story and all of us looking along, reading along, you have to live vicariously through the protagonist and learn what we would do in case we were in that same situation. I think advertising just brings that out to be a little more literal.

So that it puts us in that situation. It gives us the rising actions, the complications and then the brand is there to help bridge that gap or take us through it. Always the tricky part is, it's one thing to be able to tell a good story, but brands have to live a good story. You have to get somebody to buy into it from the stories you're telling, but now

how does that story actually play out in real life with customer engagement and brand interaction. Do you see that in your studies that on one hand a brand is telling a terrific story, but on the other hand they're not living that truth?

Keith: Oh, yeah, and with social media these days, you're not going to survive very long if that's happening. A lot of times we would tell these... we would position the product and the company in the best light possible. In advertising, that's what we were hired to do. Then you would actually experience the product. Unfortunately most of the time, you would call an 800 number and you would be transferred 8000 times and they would listen to you, but not do anything.

Now, when you jump on the internet, they have to listen, right? Now, more than ever, the brand story you tell online through your advertising, the actual experience has to live up to expectations because you make promises in advertising and then you deliver it through operations. And when there's a difference there that's when people jump on social media and make a noise about it.

Park: Now Keith, you've done a lot of great work in this area. Where can we send listeners to see more about your work and background. Do you have a website, in particular?

Keith: Yes, I have a blog called Postcontrolmarketing.com. The reasoning behind that name is technology, especially social media, has really shifted the power in terms of marketing. In marketing, we all were told these and taught these control models of controlling the

product, controlling the advertising, controlling the messaging. If anyone is practicing marketing today, you know you really have no control.

So it's Postcontrolmarketing.com and I try to provide people with tips in terms of storytelling and social media and digital media, on how to gain the control back through different methods than perhaps what we were taught and practicing a couple of years ago.

Park: Yeah, well you're dead on. I mean, brands have had to evolve and transform very quickly from being promoters of products and services, to being publisher of meaningful content that can act and adds value to people's lives versus selling them something. When we come back, I'd like to throw to our sponsor one last time here, I know you've been doing a lot of work in storytelling and social media, so let's explore that a little bit with Keith Quesenberry right after this message from our sponsor.

Welcome back to The Business of Story. My guest today, Keith Quesenberry. Now Keith, you've done a lot of work throughout your years storytelling. You've done a lot of research on storytelling. And it's one thing if you've got a multi-million dollar budget to create the next Budweiser puppy commercial for the next Super Bowl. But what if you only have 140 characters and no budget and you've got Twitter and other social media channels. How does storytelling play over into social media?

Keith: Yeah, I've been thinking about that specifically and what I've found online is that we've gotten into this content arms race where more and more people are jumping to social media, more and more people are creating content and they're posting multiple times, many times a day. It's getting very crowded.

What I've found is most people are... go back and look at all the content you've created in the past week, in the past month and analyze, "Am I sharing the same stuff over and over again?" Not literally the same information, but are you constantly just sharing how-to articles on your industry. Are you just sharing information about your latest product? I think if you go back and look at the story structure, there's different stories you can be telling over the 140 character tweets over time that hit different aspects.

For example, if you think of Act I. Act I is all about providing background and setting and establishing characters and previous events. We all buy products and services, but we also buy the company and we buy the background story of the company. Who are the founders? Why did they start the company? What do they really care about? What's their passion? Have you ever told those stories in social media or are you just sharing the same things over and over again? What's your mission? What's your vision?

Rising action. A lot of times, like I said, we're sharing the same content every day. Maybe there's a big event coming up and you can start teasing it weeks in advance. So you're building up to that potential climax that's going to happen when you introduce a new product or you're going to announce a new partnership. Plan it ahead of time and start teasing that as a rising action leading up to it.

Also, think about resolution. Resolution is Act V. This is when all the events lead to an ending scene. Everyone lives happily ever after. Your conflict has been resolved. Think about testimony, customer testimonies who have used your product or service and they're happy now and they're doing well. Show the end result of this overall story you've been telling as well, so people can get the whole picture from the founding of the company through the main issues that's happening now and the challenges and the big climax. And here's the resolution that we're all headed towards as a customer whose been working with us.

Park:

And this is where story blows people's minds because story is a fractal. In one case you're telling a story on Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, wherever, on your blog, that reflects a story that you're living at your office that is on it's own Hero's Journey or story cycle process, which is connecting with the Hero's Journey/story cycle of your customer. And it's all this same mirrored story thing that happens very much of the same sequence of exposition, conflict and resolution whether you do that in three acts or five acts. I think that's what I have learned why story is so powerful is because we naturally live one everyday, unconsciously for the most part.

We don't realize the rising action in our lives and how we respond to it. But as you mentioned earlier that we tell stories non-stop to our friends and family. And then when brands come out and if they just come out with "50% off this weekend only." Let me show you a spinning beer can and nothing else. It's all sort of either gratuitous or banal and our subconscious is like, "Dude, where's the story? Dude, you got to give me some conflict here so I can learn something with whatever you're telling me." At least, that's in my experience, how stories connect with our audiences.

In businesses, once they are more intentional about it, they have way more success in moving people to action whether you are trying to get them on board, sell them something, move a new initiative within an organization. And to your point earlier, too, social media now has completely shifted the power story into the masses because the masses are the media. Mass media no longer has the influence it once did. And I believe

you are in the throws of writing a book or just about ready to publish a book on storytelling and social media. Can you tell us a little about that Keith?

Keith: Yeah, actually, that's a good segue. When I first started getting into social media and teaching digital media I was researching and putting my classes together for my students. I couldn't find an ideal text to take a step back and look at the big picture of how do I do this social media thing? What's the big strategy? Where do I start? How do I bring it all together? There's a lot out there, really good books on digging deep into Facebook and optimizing Pinterest and looking at specific strategies and techniques. But I was missing this big picture.

That's the book I wrote that's coming out October 2015. It's called "Social Media Strategy: Marketing and Advertising in the Consumer Revolution." And again, it's playing back to that theme of, I grew up in traditional marketing and advertising where we controlled the message. We planned everything. And now suddenly these consumers came along and they took it all away from us. How do we respond to that? Right? We could go hide in the corner and suck our thumbs or we can... it's actually an opportunity to engage the consumer in your brand's story, if you have a strategy.

I think what happens now is we all know we need to be doing it, and we're just reading blog posts "The Top Ten Tips" and "Top Ten Tips" and all those tips are telling you to do different things and you read case studies. But worked for Best Buy isn't going to work for your local bank. So this is a strategic process on, start with your mission and your goals, your target audience and plan a strategy from the ground up.

Park: Absolutely. Well, these are exciting times for us communicators out there because we do have to re-think how we approach our markets and we have to involve them, not just involve them in the story, our customers need to be the center of every story we tell. Thank you very much for joining us today on The Business of Story, Keith. We really appreciate your time.

Keith: Thank you.

Park: And for the rest of you out there, if you would like some storytelling tools, you can go to BusinessofStory.com. You can download a number of different tools there that can help you outline story, story structure for presentations, your own personal story. It's a way that we can share with you our approach with the 10-step story cycle process that actually boils you down to a three or five act story within any kind of work that you're doing.

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