

Business of Story Intro Podcast with Jay Baer - "Why Story, Why Now?"

Park: Welcome to "The Business of Story." My name is Park Howell, and I am your host for this podcast. And our goal is to help you craft and tell compelling stories that sell. Now, that might be something that you have to sell on an individual basis, a career, moving up the career ladder. Or on a brand basis.

Stories that help you move your cause, your mission, your product or service further, faster, by helping your customers intertwine their story with your story. That's what "The Business of Story" is all about. And with me today is a good friend, my guest Jason Baer. Jay, welcome to the show.

Jay: Thanks so much, Park. I am delighted to be here. Congratulations on "The Business of Story" podcast. I thought we would flip the script a little bit from your usual format, and I will maybe ask you a few questions about the podcast and your background and the plans that you have for the show. So people who are new listeners to the podcast, or even folks who have maybe had some inkling of the show in the past but aren't totally sure where it came from or where it's going. This would be a good chance for them to get familiar.

So you and I have been friends for a long, long time, which is fantastic.

Park: Yeah.

Jay: We both used to operate out of Phoenix, Arizona. You're still there. I made the migration to the Midwest, which is, sort of, good news and bad news. I don't get to see you as much as I used to, face-to-face. But it wasn't too long ago that you and I were chatting a little bit and we decided that maybe we should do a podcast together.

Tell me about that, about your desire to do a podcast. It obviously takes a lot of time, a lot of effort, a lot of love. Why would you want to do a podcast at all?

Park: Well, it comes down to this, of course, concept of storytelling, and you hear that a lot today. It's sort of the soup du jour, if you will, for ad agencies and content marketers, that story is king. And it really is.

About ten years ago, I started to really dive into story, story structure, and why is it king? Why does it work? The more I learned, the more we started applying it to our business in a very intentional and pragmatic way, the more success we had across the board.

Everything from high-level brand strategy design down to the actual tactical execution. We found it in user experience and web design. We found it, actually, completely absent in PowerPoint presentations. And yet, when you use a little bit of story, how much more powerful even those board room presentations can be.

Over the course of these ten years of understanding it, studying it, and creating what we call the story cycle, which we'll go into a little bit more about, Arizona State

University came about three years ago and said, "We've seen you. You're having a lot of success with storytelling within business, and especially in sustainability.

We would like to have you come write a curriculum around this for a new executive Master's for a sustainability leadership program." Which is funded by the Rob and Melanie Walton Family Foundation, from Wal-Mart fame.

The whole mission there was to help these executives advance their sustainability initiatives further, faster. And so the more reading I did, the more learning I did, as I was crafting this program, the more I realized I need to learn. You know, as the old saying goes, Jay, "You don't know what you know until you write it down." Well, you really don't know what you know until you start teaching it.

Anyway, we launched our first cohort last year. They graduated this year in January and we've just launched our second cohort of 25 international executives. We've had some real phenomenal success with the overall program. Not just in communications, but in strategy, global context, and leadership, which are the other threads taught in EMSL.

But in pulling all of this content together I started thinking, "I need to get a podcast. I need to get a better way than just my blog, to share this with the world." Because the connections that story is making, and how it really amplifies the good, and getting people where they want to be, has just been blowing me away.

So actually, you're the cause of this. It was, I think, in March. Maybe February, I don't know. You had Convince & Convert, sent out a podcast that was, like, "The Thirteen Steps to Creating a Podcast." So I read through it and I was, you know, it was sort of daunting, thinking, "All right, well we could do this." I started checking it off down the line. I think I just sent you a quick note saying, "Hey Jay, thanks for this podcast. Perfect timing on this blog post."

You said, "Why? What's up?" And I said, "Well, I'm thinking about this story thing." And you said, "Why don't we do it together?" I guess you were an angel from God sent my way, because I don't know how we would have tackled it otherwise. So that's where we are here today together.

Jay: Well thank you. I appreciate that. That's probably too kind by about 75%, but we are lucky that Convince & Convert Media has a number of other podcasts that we produce. Our longest running show is "Social Pros," which is for people who are professional social media managers. We have a show called "Content Pros," we do a video show called "Jay Today." And now, of course, "Business of Story."

So luckily we have a tremendous amount of expertise on the team here at Convince & Convert. Not me, but expertise on the team to help make podcasts better and fantastic and worth listening to, because obviously there's lots of shows out there.

Let me ask you about that. So as you mentioned, there's a lot of people now talking about story, right? That you have to tell a story in order to break through the enormous messaging clutter that we're all faced with.

What does that really mean? People throw that line out all the time, "Well, you should just do storytelling" or, "You should incorporate story into your marketing." What does that really mean?

Is it like, sort of making up a fairy tale or a half-truth or a fake character? What does that actually mean in the real world?

Park: What it actually means is structuring a narrative much like an architect designs a building. But structuring a narrative that absolutely connects with how the brain is hard-wired to take in story. To pull in events and create meaning out of it.

So yes, in the advertising world, in the content marketing world, story is king and everybody's good storytellers. And I will say they should be. If they are any good at this business that we're in, you need to be a pretty good storyteller.

But what we're finding, and I've found through our work with our clients and the work at ASU, is 95% of the world are not very good storytellers. Yet, it's innate within them. So, in fact, I'm going up to your old stomping grounds, right after this session, up to Flagstaff.

I'm doing a storytelling workshop this afternoon with librarians. Particularly in libraries outside of the main rural areas. I find it very interesting to teach librarians storytelling. But it goes back to this underscoring the fact that most people aren't comfortable doing it.

Gordon McKenzie, who was an artist for Hallmark cards back in the day, I think he worked for them for, like, 35 years. A very brilliant, outside the box type of thinker. And in fact, he was the genesis of Shoebox greetings for Hallmark cards, because he got kind of tired of the very safe way they went about making cards and he wanted to do something a little more interesting.

Well, Gordon tells the story of going into schools. In his time out, he would go and sit with kids from kindergarten up through sixth grade and try to underscore the importance of arts in their life, in school and in business.

He would walk into the first grade and he would look around on the walls and see all this wonderful artwork on the wall. And he would ask the class, "Who's the artist that created all this wonderful artwork?" And every hand in the class shot up.

Then he could go out the hall, walk down two doors, go into the second grade. And he would pose the very same question, "Who's the artist that did all this wonderful artwork on the wall?" And only half the hands in the room would go up.

Third grade, only a third of the hands in the room would go up. You see where this is going. By the fifth and sixth grade, he could barely get one person to raise their hand and say, "I'm an artist."

I think the same is exactly true in storytelling. We were all at the tops of our games when we were in kindergarten. But our educational system told us to draw within the lines, stop telling stories, learn by rote, you know? As we got older and as we got greater degrees and as we got into the business world, everybody has drawn the curtain closed on our innate storyteller. It just wasn't cool to be telling stories.

Now, those in our lines of work, we never listened to that. We never adapted to that, and probably our grades show for that, coming up through the ranks. But we are all innate storytellers. And all I try to do now through our agency is not just talk about storytelling, but we get in and we show people how to reignite that innate storyteller. We do it through using basic story structure.

It all starts with acts one, two and three. A beginning, a middle and an end. This is a long-winded way of answering your question, Jay. What is it about story that works? It's conflict. It's the middle. It's the middle of the story that we in business tend to ignore, or we choose not to air the conflict that's going on in our lives and in our world.

But when we add a little bit of conflict, where the tension is in the story, then you truly have the brain's attention. It's ready to snap to attention and listen to what you have to say.

So it comes down to: story structure on the most basic levels is act one, exposition. Act two, conflict. Act three, resolution. You can dial that up in any way that you can possibly think of. But when people use that basic premise to telling stories, whether it's a PowerPoint, whether it's content marketing, a blog post, a podcast, whatever, they automatically dial into this hard-wiring mechanism in the brain and the brain snaps to because, it wants to know what it needs to learn from the conflict within the story.

Jay: One of the things that I think is really interesting about this show is that, while the concept of the show is how do you apply storytelling in a business, marketing, communications context, many of the guests that you have on the show, either on the show already or coming up or plan to be talked to on the show, are not necessarily from business, in the way that you and I are from, you know, professional services.

You've got people who appear on this show that talk about storytelling in a way that isn't necessarily the obvious form and fashion. I think that's particularly fascinating. Do you want to touch on that a little bit?

Park: Sure. I've been at this advertising business for about 30 years. I can't believe it's already been that long. Like every agency, we have some spectacular successes and then we have a mediocre misstep now and again, or that occasional failure that just means you're trying hard.

What I wanted to figure out is, how could we get to be more intentional, more practical about our storytelling? So it really started just over ten years ago when our middle son, Parker, went to film school over in Hollywood.

He went to Chapman University, studied film, got a minor in business, and he's in Hollywood now. He's a motion graphics artist there. In fact, he just got back from the Cannes Film Festival, as he's trying to sell his first film that he wrote.

Jay: That doesn't suck. That's a good gig.

Park: He's into it up to his eyeballs and he loves it. But when he was going to Chapman I just said, "Hey, since we're paying for the textbooks, why don't you send them to me when you're done with them because I want to know what Hollywood knows." And that's when it really first started dawning on me, because it's when I got introduced to Joseph Campbell and started studying his work. You know, America's foremost mythologist and how he used the hero's journey.

I studied Blake Snyder and screenwriters. I realized there was this wonderful cross section between the arts of what Hollywood knows and how to captivate an audience in story, this cross section with that with business. Isn't that exactly what we're all trying to do? We want to own that board room, break room, chat room, living room, TV set, whatever, with the stories we tell.

So that led me then to really dive deep into studying the art of storytelling. And in fact, I went to Robert McKee's four day screenwriting lecture, which is really just a legendary event over at the Sheraton LAX hotel in a conference room there.

This old guy, he's a legend screenwriting coach. He's about 74 now. I went to try to understand, what does he teach these Hollywood screenwriters? There was about 200 in the room, and then my son went to learn what he could learn as a Hollywood screenwriter.

Well, not too long after that, I got invited to Robert's house in Connecticut and I spent an afternoon with him recording my first feeble attempt at a podcast. I did ten episodes with Robert, asking him: what does Hollywood know that business people need to know to become better storytellers? That is what this podcast is all about, and what a lot of my work at ASU is based on.

Now, having said all of that, this has led me to really terrific writers. Jonathan Gottschall, who will be a guest on this show. I don't have my list in front of me right now, but I've got a lot of different artists.

So, understanding what Hollywood knows and the artists know led me to a lot of different people out there that I thought would be really powerful for business people to hear from. So it's this cross section of the arts with business.

For instance, Jonathan Gottschall, who wrote "The Storytelling Animal," which is a phenomenal book. He will be one of our guests and he just came out with a new book called "The Professor in the Cage." it's all about him becoming an MMA fighter, actually, after being an English professor. It's all about how the mind literally grapples, pardon the pun, for meaning.

Jay: Is that a non-fiction story? Is that a real. . . He actually did that? Or it's a story about that?

Park: No, it's a non-fiction story. He just launched it. It went out two weeks ago.

Jay: No way. It's like a George Plimpton kind of thing. Like a new fangled George Plimpton. I love it.

Park: Totally is. In fact, he calls up George Plimpton's name several times in it. This guy went into the cage at age 40, to give you an idea. Because he wanted to figure out, why do men fight and why do we enjoy watching men fight? He figured the only way he could really learn is he trained for three years and then went in the cage. And I won't tell you the outcome after that, but a great book.

Jonathan has become a good friend, and he is a guest lecturer at ASU for us. But when I found Jonathan, it was through his book "The Storytelling Animal." He has this great line that says, "The human mind yields helplessly to the suction of story." So if that's the case, then why don't we use it more often in business?

Another really interesting author. . .

Jay: Also, the official security guy, right, for the show? So if this show gets big enough where you need security, Park, he can be the official bouncer for "The Business of Story." It's going to be amazing.

Park: You know, that's a really, really good idea. Some other guests, we have Lisa Cron on. She's a UCLA professor, and she's the author of "Wired for Story." Now, her book is focused on helping authors themselves just become better authors. But I have found amazing things within her pages that content marketers can use to become better at what we all do.

We also have Randy Olson, who is a Harvard trained PhD oceanographer. Left a tenured post, went to school at the UCLA film school. Graduated, created two documentaries, two books, he's just about ready to publish his third book. He is all about how storytelling and science needs to come together so that these wonderful, brilliant scientists can actually communicate on levels that the rest of us can understand.

Think about that, Jay. How many times when we have clients or even ourselves, when we know ourselves so well, we seem to talk over everybody else's head. He just has a lot of great ideas of how to use story and story structure to boil your story down and make it very accessible and embraceable by the masses.

Jay: We talked about that. There's a number of authors who are going to be on this show, which is great because you can really dig in deep and they've thought through these storytelling issues at length, which is amazing. One of the things that I really am excited about with this show is that, in addition to having amazing guests and guests that are not part of the usual marketing-hype bubble; is that we're planning on having, in many cases not for every episode, but for a lot of episodes, actual other resources that

listeners to this show can get online, that serve as a companion to the show episode itself.

Do you want to talk about that a little bit? How it's, yes, a podcast, of course. But also sort of a podcast with homework. But not in a bad way. In a good way.

Park: Yeah, absolutely. What my goal, again, teaching at ASU has been is to help them advance their sustainability initiatives further, faster, is the same goal I have with this show. How can I help our listeners advance whatever they are trying to achieve further, faster by connecting with the people who need to embrace their stories and vice versa?

So with that, I have all kinds of tools and they can be downloaded at TheBusinessOfStory.com. We're only going to launch with, I think, three tools. But I've got a quiver of about 12 different items that people will be able to download.

It will help them with everything from basic, basic story structure, outlines that they can use to get their heads around their stories, to presentation story boarding, to how to use the story cycle, our ten step process to narrative. Everything from brand strategy right down to tactical execution.

One of the very first pieces that we will is actually an interactive PDF that will take you through the ten-step process of the story cycle. You can fill it out as you go, and you can use it literally for any personal, any professional story you have. And so it's just a way to help frame, inform your story. Once you have the content in place, then the creativity really begins. You can mix and match and turn the chapters around, and order them and reorder them in any way you like, to make your story uniquely your own.

Jay: That's fantastic. I love that concept. I just am so enamored with the idea that it's not just whatever you hear in your ears, but there's other parts to this process, and making the podcast itself as useful as possible to the listeners. I think that's awesome.

Park, as we close up here, I'll let you wrap it up. But one thing I wanted to ask you is if people who are listening to the show, on iTunes or Stitcher or on the website or wherever they may be, have ideas, questions, comments, they want to talk to you about the show: What's the best way for "The Business of Story" nation, if you will, to reach out to you?

Park: Yeah, the best way is to go to TheBusinessOfStory.com. And you can find my contact information there. Send me an email. Absolutely would love to hear your thoughts on the show. What's working for you, what's unclear. Guests that you might like to see and hear on the program. But just simply go to TheBusinessOfStory.com.

Feel free to hit iTunes, share it with your friends, and, of course, give us your review. Let us know what you think of the program because we want to make sure that it's working for you, the audience. You are the hero in this particular journey.

Jay: I feel like a hero already. You have made me feel like a hero just in this short introduction to the show. What's next for the show? What's the next move?

Park: Well, as you know, we're launching July 1. We have already recorded a number of great guests. Some of our first ones will be Kevin Richardson who, where I found Kevin was back in 2010. He was the winner of Volkswagen's Fun Theory. If you've never seen it, go to TheFunTheory.com. Volkswagen did some really amazing things, and he won it in 2010 with this speed camera lottery concept. You can Google that online, see a short video.

But he's great because he is an animator. He just finished working on a large animated film in China. He's also a game designer, and he brings really interesting concepts to storytelling about how to turn negative loops into positive ones that we can all learn from.

Then we jump over to a really, really fascinating gentleman, Vincent Stanley, who is the director of philosophy for Patagonia. He's been with Patagonia since day one, and you will hear on the show he only signed up for a six-month slot to help them get off the ground. And now he's been there 42 some years. Anyways, he will share with us how Patagonia approaches its storytelling.

Anyways, we've got great guest after great guest. I think we have 14 in the queue right now, and many more to come. Again, the bottom line to this show is in every program you will be able to walk away with two or three tips that you can use, immediately, to help reignite that storyteller inside of you. Or if you're already good at storytelling, some little tips to help you kind of fine tune that sword of storytelling.

Jay: Fantastic. I cannot wait. Park, congratulations. I'm super fired up. Can't wait for everybody to be listening to "The Business of Story." I'm Jay Baer. He is Park Howell. Make sure you send an email, reach out, download the resources when we make them. You are going to love this program.

Park: Thank you, Jay. And we couldn't have done it without you and your tremendous team there at Convince & Convert.