

Business of Story Podcast with Kevin Richardson - "Creating Positive Story Loops"

Park: Well, welcome back to another edition of "The Business of Story" podcast where we will bring you tips, tricks, and techniques on how to become a better storyteller and make your stories more impactful, no matter what your quest is, be it a personal goal or professional mission. Today we have a really exciting guest in Kevin Richardson, but before we get to Kevin, of course I've got to share a story with you.

This is an old Aesop fable and it's one of my favorites. It's about the north wind and the sun. They were hanging out one day trying to decide who was the most powerful between them. The north wind was blustering about how strong he was with his gale force winds and hollering hurricanes. The sun remained pretty cool in all this and he just posed a simple challenge to the north wind. Whoever could strip a wayfaring man of his clothes would be the victor.

Well, the north wind swept up the challenge, began blowing down on a traveler with his frigid north air, which quickly grew into a gale. The traveler wrapped his cloak about him and leaned into the north wind. The keener the blasts, the tighter the wayfarer bundled himself within his cloak. At last, resigning all hope of victory, the north wind called upon the sun to see what he could do. The sun peeked out from behind the storm clouds and began to shine brightly upon the man. The traveler felt the genial rays and began taking off one garment after another, undressed, and bathed himself in the sun-drenched afternoon.

Well, the moral of this story is persuasion is always better than force. We in the business world, can find no force greater for persuasion than the power of storytelling. Today, Kevin Richardson will take us through his work over the last couple decades working in the entertainment industry and gamification. He's been doing so many things in this area that, if I went through a whole dossier of his background, I don't know where I would stop. So I'm going to start by introducing Kevin.

Kevin, tell us a little bit about your journey, of where you are today. I know you just got back from China, working on an animated feature over there. Kevin, welcome to the Business of Story.

Kevin: Thanks. Yeah, I don't know if I'm an exciting guest. Wow, decades, that's true. That's true. I just got back from Shenzhen, China. I was there off and on for six months, managing the story team on a feature animated film.

Park: Well, and before that you worked for GameSpin, Ants Animation, Nickelodeon, MTV, Viacom, Electronic Arts. I think you were even an artist over at Industrial Light and Magic for a while. Is that correct?

Kevin: And on a Disney feature as well, that's true, all those places. A lot of water under the bridge.

Park: Which Disney feature did you work on?

Kevin: The original Brave Little Toaster, which was John Lasseter's pet project that he was hoping to do in 3D, but they just weren't ready to do it yet. So if you watch The Brave Little Toaster and you watch Toy Story, you'll see it's pretty much the same movie.

Park: Is that right? The Brave Little Toaster. Can you pull that up on YouTube, I presume?

Kevin: You can, yeah, absolutely. You can rent it on Netflix or YouTube or stream it from Amazon, anything you like.

Park: I have to go pull up The Brave Little Toaster. With a title like that, it's got to be fantastic. Well, Kevin, you and I got a chance to meet at Sustainable Brands Conference. I think it was in 2011. What really intrigued me, I just totally lucked into your session, I had been following Volkswagen's The Fun Theory for the year or two prior to that when they had first kicked it off.

Volkswagen did a great job of getting people involved in the story about doing social good by surprising them with different events and, I don't know, novelties as their life went along, as they were walking down the street. One of the Fun Theory things that caught my attention was when they created a piano staircase out of a staircase that allowed people to run up and down and make the sounds of a piano very much like Tom Hanks did in the movie, Big.

Kevin: Correct.

Park: They wanted to see if they could change behavior. Could they get people to take the stairs by having fun with it versus the escalator that was right alongside of it. So that was what first got my attention to Volkswagen's brilliant story around social good using the Fun Theory. Then you won it. An international contest, you came up with a remarkable idea, and I believe you won the contest in 2010, correct?

Kevin: That's correct, yeah.

Park: Can you tell us about that? I heard you talk about this at Sustainable Brands and that's when I thought your approach to storytelling and turning negative loops into positive ones, per our moral of the story today, was really powerful for all business leaders and communicators.

Kevin: Sure. Well, I was working at Nickelodeon and feeling that I, like many people out there, I'm sure, "Am I making any difference in this world? Could I do something that would make a difference in people's lives besides making these games and entertaining people?" I saw the piano staircase video, the Volkswagen Fun Theory video, and decided to just go two clicks further, and learned that there was a competition to decide on what the next Fun Theory experiment would be. For those who don't know what that is, the challenge of the Fun Theory is, "Can you change human behavior for the better through fun?" I racked my brain, and that evening I thought I should strike while the iron was hot.

That evening, after everybody was asleep at our house, I started doodling some ideas. I guess one of the things that was near and dear to my heart was, I had witnessed and seen the aftermath of some traffic accidents involving children. Since I'm a dad, I thought maybe there's something there, a place to play there. I thought, "Could you slow people down or regulate speed through fun?" I'm a pot-stirrer, my mom always called me a pot-stirrer, so I thought, "Is there any way to kind of get the government out of this?" Of course the government would be involved.

But in any case the speed camera lottery involves essentially showing a sign, a speed sign, one of those digital speed signs, and then checking the speed of every driver that goes past, photographing the bad players and sending them a ticket. But then also photographing and entering those who are going the speed limit into a lottery, and they win that money that was put into that pool from the people who paid tickets. So that was it. It was just kind of a closed loop creating a positive into this versus, right now you get a ticket. If you want to fight it, you go to court, and there's some who sits on a bench and people are listening, and it's just a crazy amount of negative attention. So I wanted to change that.

Park: Do you have any idea how many entries from around the world Volkswagen got that they selected yours over?

Kevin: Oh, there were thousands. I was very pleased and surprised. I entered three. There was no limit to the number of ideas you could send in too, which was great. By the way, the business people will appreciate this, I had the benefit of learning about it late in the game, so there were already hundreds and hundreds of ideas up on their website, and I got a chance to look at everything that had been submitted. Their thing was that they would immediately post it because, you know, sometimes ideas will spur other people to have ideas that will inspire them. So I was very inspired by all the other ideas too.

Park: Pretty smart. So you were able to scan the competition a little bit to help you refine your idea.

Kevin: Totally unintended. It was just how it worked out.

Park: Perfect. No, great opportunity. What were your other two ideas that did not make the cut for you?

Kevin: Well, one was, could you get kids to eat fruits and vegetables if it was more fun? I had proposed that, if you've ever walked through a supermarket, especially a big chain, they put the chewing gum and the candies at child height at the checkout stand. So my proposal was, what if you had colorful edible wrappers around carrots and dried fruits and even bananas? Would that make those items as exciting as a chocolate bar that had the same kind of screaming colors and cool logos on it? That was one idea. The other, I'm drawing a blank on what my third idea is, but if I remember it I will let you know.

Park: That's how good it was.

Kevin: Yeah, exactly.

Park: The speed camera lottery video is still up on YouTube and you can also see it on our website over at TheBusinessOfStory.com. A question for you then, Kevin. At the time you were working at Nickelodeon, right? Doing kids and family game creation?

Kevin: Correct.

Park: How did what you learned there impact the story that you told to arrive at your idea and the story that was ultimately told through speed camera lottery?

Kevin: Well, I started in the film business. I didn't start in the games business. I started in the film business at Cal Arts, the same school that John Lasseter and many others have gone to. My curiosity has always been in story, and that led me to Cal Arts, to their motion picture school, but I learned story formally and also informally. Formally at Cal Arts through story analysis and script writing, and informally or even passively in a way by reading a lot of books and by, I obviously must have already a little bit of a story mind. I get it wrong, like everybody else does, too, often. So I was always intrigued with story.

From there I went, some years back I decided to jump over to games for a while, and that got me to EA and Nickelodeon, etcetera, as a producer and designer of games. Even in games there's a narrative going on. A narrative doesn't have to be a written narrative, obviously. The speed camera lottery has a narrative, but it's through action that you experience that narrative. The same is true of many, many games. Anyway, that was my path. It was from movies to games to boredom and speed camera lottery.

Park: Are there elements in what you've learned, everything from speed camera lottery to gaming to the work you've been doing, are there elements to story that business people can use in a very simplified version to think about what they would bring to their narratives, whether it's trying to own the board room with a really killer PowerPoint.

And I know that sounds like an oxymoron, but I have found that when you bring story structure to PowerPoints you can really have an impact, to their planning and strategy for brands and campaigns right down to individual execution of, be they radio spots, TV commercials? What are some of the things that you could impart on the audience, the simple things that they can use to look at for story structure in their professional careers?

Kevin: Well, I think the most important thing is to understand where the tension or the pain point is for the individual person using or doing the thing, whatever that thing is, and I've often said that we need to stop treating people like consumers and thinking of them as just this big swath of ants. What individually are they concerned about? Because that's what motion pictures do. They're very much concerned with the human side of drama and tension, and if we can do that in advertising, too, I think that's smart and good. Then you will feel it. I think anything where you can feel the message, and it's not just an intellectual thing, then you're way ahead of the game.

Park: I agree with you, the tension side. I mean, there is no such thing as story without conflict of some sort. Would you agree?

Kevin: Oh, absolutely, yeah. That's what the speed camera lottery, the conflict is clearly, nobody wants to get busted, and this is a way of busting you for doing good and bad things. So this is at the cross hairs of where that tension is.

Park: All right. Well, this is the perfect time, then. Let's take a quick break and let's hear from one of our terrific sponsors for "The Business of Story" podcast.

Park: Well, welcome back. We were talking about tension in a story, and there's no such thing as story without some sort of conflict. I once heard from one of our clients, he said, "You know, Park, when it comes down to selling it's all about, find the hurt, amplify the

pain, heal the wound." Now in hindsight I look back, and that is the perfect three-act story structure to sales and marketing, isn't it? Find the hurt, amplify the pain, heal the wound. Tell us a little bit about how you do that.

Kevin: Well, there are lots of ways to do it. There are theories about it and there are some good books like *Save the Cat*, which is an excellent book on storytelling.

Park: Blake Snyder's book, yes.

Kevin: Yeah, I love that book, and it has literally saved some productions that I've been on, that book, because-

Park: For the audience, do you want to explain real quick what *Save the Cat* is? To me it was one of the very first things I read.

Kevin: Okay, so there are a couple of great books out there. If you meet anybody teaching story, they will often, not always, but often have two books at their side. On one side there will be Bob McCray? Am I saying it right? Bob McKay.

Park: Oh, Robert McKee's *Story*?

Kevin: Robert McKee's *Story*. Thank you. This thing is giant. It's a thousand pages, maybe more, and you'll see that person weighted down on the other side. Then you've got Blake Snyder's *Save the Cat*, which is probably 120 pages. It's the antithesis of the other one. Robert's is a little bit more in depth, and he's definitely a very important pundit in the area, but it goes into a lot of detail. If you like that kind of thing, it's for you.

Whereas *Save The Cat* is straight ahead and he kind of shoots from the hip and he gives you a format so that you can just pretty much dive right in and start telling your story. It's like he's right there helping you along. Anyway, those are good books.

Park: Yeah, and real quick, Blake Snyder unfortunately passed away a few years ago and he was still a pretty young man. As I recall he was one of the top, if not the top, screenwriting professionals in Hollywood specializing in family films, and he sold a ton of screenplays to Disney. A few of them did get made, but his *Save the Cat* is about his 15-step structure on how to write these films for the family genre.

It was one of the very first books that I read on the subject. Our son was going to film school at Chapman University back in 2006-2007-ish, and I asked him, "Hey, since we're paying for the textbooks, when you're done with them, send them to me because I want to know what Hollywood knows about this." One of the first ones he sent me was *Save the Cat*, and I did, I got a ton of great insight out of it.

But circling back to the question I had for you, it's all about that conflict. What do you see in business? Why do businesses and business communicators tend to shy away from conflict and how should they use it in their stories to make greater connections with their audiences?

Kevin: Well, I think being on the entertainment side of this is the thing that is always on my checklist, and when we're filling out a form, if I create that form, the top of the thing is,

"What's the story problem?" Back to your salesperson, what's the problem that we're trying to solve?

Park: Find the hurt.

Kevin: Then my next question is, yeah, find the hurt, "Does anybody care about this problem?" If the answer is, "No," then you need to go back to the first step and make sure that somebody cares or you can explain it in a way so that you can find the hurt, to use your friend's analogy.

Park: And then find an audience who cares, with that audience you amplify the pain.

Kevin: Yeah, yeah, and that would be your second act, all hope is lost, you know?

Park: Right, right.

Kevin: All hope is lost, which brings you to your climax and your finale.

Park: Heal the wound.

Kevin: Find your final image, yeah. There you go. So you have the whole story arc there.

Park: And it's interesting. When I teach this I will do a lot of work with corporate leaders and especially folks, sales teams that have to go out and present their presentations. When they show me their PowerPoints, of course, they're just littered full of stats and graphs and bullets and charts. I tell them, "That just does nothing but confuse the mind. The data is not the story. It is the foundation for the story, but it is not the story." And Robert McKee, who you mentioned earlier, is famous for saying, "You want to turn data into drama," how to deliver that data through the power of storytelling.

So I want to go back to your speed camera lottery. In some cases that's all about data because you are whistling down the road and you're looking at the data of whether you're speeding or not. You're getting confronted with data when it tells you how fast you're going, if that light flashes, if you know you've been going too fast and you're busted. But ultimately you were able to take that negative loop and turn it into a positive one. What were the outcomes that they saw from that?

Kevin: Well, people slowed down for two reasons. One is they suddenly were, of course, aware that they were exceeding the speed limit. But secondly they realized that the sign responded positively when they were going the proper speed limit, and everybody likes to win money. So they saw a decrease in speed.

Sweden, by the way, I didn't realize this when I presented the idea, is trying to get to a zero traffic death statistic, and they had put all kinds of money behind anything that will get them there. I didn't realize this. Also their fines for speeding are very high. In fact I think someone was fined several hundred thousand US dollars for going 100 miles per hour on one of their autobahns. So it's a serious deal for the Swedes.

Park: Wow. Yeah, you'd think that would be a deterrent.

Kevin: Yeah, absolutely, but I think for me inventing this was, I was trying to think of things that were bothering me. For me the thing was remembering these children that had been hit. And then remembering that it sort of angers me the whole, if you've ever gotten a speeding ticket and had to fight it, it just seems like an extraordinarily draconian, complicated process, and there's tension. When you go by one of these cameras you get flashed and your heart starts to beat faster, it's sort of you against big brother, etcetera.

Park: The Matrix.

Kevin: So there are all these associations, yeah, yeah. There are all these associations. The drama's all there. The whole story is all there, and the outcome of that story is not a good one if you get a ticket. Even for the person who paid the fine I think, knowing their money is going to someone who obeyed the law, has this sort of beautiful niceness to it. You might be grumpy about your money going to the government where you're not happy with all the places where your money might be going. But nobody can disagree that, if I get a ticket and it goes to you, Park, for going the speed limit, I might be grumpy about it, but it's a different kind of grumpy.

Park: Well, I've got to tell you I did get a speeding ticket a couple months ago. I was literally racing to a doctor's appointment. I had been late to it prior and I got in trouble with the doctor for being five minutes late. I guess it doesn't matter if they have you sitting there for 50 minutes before they come and see you. Anyway, I was racing the second time there. I got flashed, I got the ticket in the mail, but I know in Arizona at least, that you really don't have to respond to that ticket unless they serve you in person.

This has worked for me in the past. I've been able to skirt them. They have forgotten about me, but sure enough, one Sunday afternoon a little, old lady came knocking on the door and my wife went there and she very kindly asked, "Does Park Howell live here?" Michelle says, "Why yes, he does," and boom, I got my summons, got served.

So then I spent a lovely Saturday afternoon, and it was literally lovely outside, about four hours taking my online class to get rid of my ticket which, by the way, that online class still cost me about \$240. So there's still some money involved in it as well. You know, when it's all said and done I did learn something and I am actually using some of those tips as I'm driving out there, so hopefully I'm safer in this process.

Kevin: Exactly.

Park: Before we wrap up today's show, let's take one more break for our wonderful sponsor and then let's come back and I've got another question or two for you, Kevin.

Kevin: Sure.

Park: We'll be right back.

Park: All right, we're back with "The Business of Story" and Kevin Richardson, a great conversation so far with Kevin's background in entertainment and gaming. Kevin, you've done a lot over your career and you had mentioned at the top of the show, just got back from China where you were helping direct and make an animated feature

there. We've been talking about speed camera lotto, which you know is one of my favorite social cause initiative stories that get people really involved.

In all your background in entertainment and gamification, can you give our listeners two or three story tips that they can use immediately to plug into their life to be more persuasive, to connect better with their audiences, to have more empathy, and to essentially help them further their quests faster?

Kevin: Well, let's see. I guess I would try to find out or make sure that the way you're telling your story, that the tension, the problem, is universal. So if you can't describe it in a universal way yet, I would definitely spend a lot of time there because it goes back to my second question, which I spoke about earlier. Why should anybody care about this? When I mean anybody, I mean somebody besides, that cliché, somebody besides your mother. So is there some universal problem or universal way to discuss this problem?

But even so, whether it's a product it service or even if you're making a movie or a game, you still want to make sure the way the jeopardy is explained or presented is universal. I think we all know when we see a movie or hear a story or read a story that doesn't ring true, it's because it just doesn't pertain to my life, right? There are not that many, I think, universal human themes, and so if we can tap into one of those, that's a good place to start.

Park: So to be clear, what you're saying, it sounds like, is that all stories have a universal truth to them. And it's one of these basic truths that you want to have come out through the story or the game that you're performing or whatever it is. Is that correct?

Kevin: Well, all stories where you want a lot of people to connect to it.

Park: Okay.

Kevin: There are a lot of stories where, if you're at the electro-cardiologists' convention, there may be a story just for them that they will like, and that's going to be different, but-

Park: Well, that's what I was wondering, too, because universal of course is so big. But when you were at Nickelodeon, for instance, you had a very set demographic or audience you were going after, but you need to kind of find a universal truth as they see the world from their viewpoint. Is that kind of what you're saying here?

Kevin: Yeah, that's right. Find out something that they care about. That's where the drama of the story should be. Without your service or your product or playing the game or sitting until the end of the movie, it should be so compelling that you just don't want to leave the theater or stop playing the game or stop listening to the advertisement or stop using that product, right? It should be that compelling. What will keep you in the seat of the theater, etcetera. I think that's the acid test, right? The other test is, people think I'm kidding, but we just got ourselves a dog, a labradoodle, and even though it sounds insane, I do think-

Park: We just got a golden doodle, so right on. We've got two doodles going here. Sorry, go.

Kevin: There you go. Would using my product or service be more fun than spending the same amount of time with my dog?

Park: Yeah. The retriever test. I love it.

Kevin: Well, yeah, in a way because they're engaging and there's novelty and they're fun. It sounds crazy, but I think that's actually not a bad bar to shoot for, but that's a hard one to use. Anyway, I think the story has to, if it's for a mass market, tap into universal themes and has to be something that we care about.

The third question I always ask is then, if nobody does anything, what will happen? I think you have to answer that third question. So in other words, if nobody buys my insurance product or nobody drinks this coffee or nobody finishes this game, what will happen? In the game it might be, "Well, then the world will be destroyed or the evil force will come in," but I think you need to answer that for your own product because that is all part of the caring. The triage around, why should somebody care about this specific thing?

Park: So finding that universal truth within your audience. Is your story compelling enough that you would rather watch it or take part in it than going out and playing with your dog? And that third one was, what happens if nobody does anything?

Kevin: What if I don't do those first two things? What if I don't engage in this at all? It should be, "Well then," dot, dot, dot. It's got to be careful. Maybe that's to amplify the pain, maybe.

Park: Yeah, I guess it is, especially for the storyteller. Then one last question for you before we sign off here, Kevin. Say, again, that I am a business leader communicator and I have my 50 slide PowerPoint deck, and it's filled with stats and facts. What could I do from a story standpoint to just add, as I call, a spoonful of story helps the data go down? What can I do, what is one tip you could give me to make me a better storyteller in that board room?

Kevin: Well, I would do what they do in games and movies and books, present some dire, horrible situation maybe in the first few slides. And then just completely skip to something else and build back up to, but then you can let everybody know we're going to talk about that and we have a solution for that. Then present your case towards how you're going to fix that first problem, and then show the happy ending, you know? I would encourage everybody to look at *Save the Cat*, only because it's a short and very approachable book. I think you can learn a lot about story.

Park: It's a great book, and I did take Robert McKee's story workshop. It's four days of massive amounts of download, over at the LAX Sheridan. I went over there a couple years ago with our son, the filmmaker, who took the course wanting to be a screenwriter/director and who, by the way, just took his first film over to Cannes Film Festival. I should say a sizzle reel trailer for his film, trying to sell it over there. So he's deep into the Hollywood scene as a motion graphics designer over there as well as now wanting to be an aspiring writer/producer/director.

Kevin: Wow.

Park: But Robert McKee's story workshop is fantastic, and I got a chance to spend the afternoon with Robert in his Connecticut home and did a podcast a couple years ago

before I even really knew what I was doing here. I've got four hours of tremendous content with Robert on how to use story in business. So someday I'll actually do something with that, but I couldn't agree with you more heartily that those two books are fantastic. First that very approachable *Save the Cat*, by Blake Snyder. I got a lot out of that. Plus, he's got a second book out called *Save the Cat Goes to the Movies*. I don't know if you've seen that, Kevin.

Kevin: I have not. I'm aware it exists. I've not read it.

Park: Yeah, I think he outlines 40 movies, and these are all popular movies that you've seen from *The Matrix* to *The Wizard of Oz* and everything in between, and takes you through his version of Joseph Campbell's *Hero's Journey*, his 15 steps, and you can see each one of them play out. I shared that with a client once.

He says, "Oh great, you've just ruined all movies for me forever," and I said, "Actually no. To me it makes them more interesting to watch," because you can kind of see the science behind the story. And when you watch a movie and it's not working for you, it's typically because something within that structure broke down, and you can easily go back to *Save the Cat* and see where it broke down.

Kevin: Right, and I think it's fair, I think this is a good point for me to, I once took a class by a guy named Robert Mauer. He was a clinical psychologist and he made the point, and he was right on, stories are biological. The stories that we tell and that we enjoy listening to and that get us all excited and engaged are particularly human. No other animal on the planet that we're aware of, anyway, is telling stories. The kind of structures that we enjoy, I know you've got Joseph Campbell, I think, in one of the classes that you're teaching from or using some of the [inaudible 00:34:51].

Park: Well, he's been sort of the inspiration behind our story cycle. His *Hero's Journey* is certainly the inspiration behind our work.

Kevin: Right. So story is a way that we organize information in our head, a specific way around stories so that it makes sense to us, and it's biological. I think that we know when the story is told well and when it's not, and so these books offer, I think, a glimpse at how to structure your story so that it's accessible to the average person. I think that's where the magic in these things are.

Park: I couldn't agree with you more. And in fact, bringing it full circle now, I think most of us go in approaching business and business communications as the north wind did, sort of blustery and blowing about and trying to make our gale force winds move our audiences in directions that we want them to go versus directions that they really need to go or want to go themselves. Where story comes out, story is the sun that shines down upon us, warms us, has empathy for the audiences, and story truly helps us measure the world in any direction you choose when done right. I'd also say, "Use it for good and not evil," because it is extraordinarily effective when you make story a big part of your communication.

So I wanted to thank you again for joining us today, Kevin. It's always a pleasure. Like I said, the first time we got to meet back in 2011, very memorable. Kevin has been a guest host speaker at my class with the Executive Masters for Sustainability Leadership program that I teach storytelling at Arizona State University, and Kevin's been a part of

our course there, too. So we've struck up a great friendship, met that one time in person, but have had a great online friendship, and I really appreciate your time here with the show today.

Kevin: Oh, you're welcome. I want to see your I3. You'll have to give me a ride in it.

Park: Well, now that you're back, come on over. Come on over to Arizona. We'll scoot around. I don't think I have enough range to get over to see you with it.

Kevin: No, exactly.

Park: Thanks again.

Kevin: Okay, well thanks again.

Park: Yeah, and thank you all for listening to "The Business of Story." Please go to TheBusinessOfStory.com. We have a lot of storytelling tools there that you can download and use and implement immediately. Again, my whole goal of this program is to introduce you to fascinating folks like Kevin Richardson who are true experts at storytelling. So there you have it for today's show.

Visit TheBusinessOfStory.com and we will look forward to seeing you next week when we will have with us another fascinating guest. This is the Director of Philosophy at Patagonia. His name is Vincent Stanley, and talking about a provocative storyteller, both himself and the entire brand of Patagonia. So he will be imparting some of the wisdom around Patagonia and even their stories of saying, "Don't buy from us if you don't need us." I mean, what American retailer does that? So join us next time on the Business of Story, and thank you all for listening.