

Business of Story Podcast with Vincent Stanley - "How to Be a Story Activist"

Park:

I think the measure of a great story is that it provokes you, pushes you into uncomfortable areas, makes you think, pisses you off, makes you happy, sad laugh. Great stories are all about conflict. Welcome to The Business of Story where we'll give you tips and tricks on how to use storytelling to advance your personal and professional quests further, faster.

Today we have the chief storytelling officer, my title for him, of a brand that is truly a provocateur in its industry, Patagonia. What makes them so provocative is that, at least to me, they go so far as to say, "Don't buy our clothes if you don't need to." You won't need any other American retailers taking that stance with their sales. Now, the great thing too about Patagonia is they are remarkable publishers of content, not only around their product, but around the environment and the people and the worlds that they serve.

In fact, over the weekend I watched a relatively new documentary produced by Patagonia called DamNation. It's about the century of choking off our waterways by damming up rivers and streams in the name of progress. Now I didn't realize there are nearly 80,000 dams in the U.S. and there is a movement afoot that is beginning to tear down many of them to free our rivers.

Now, I have to admit I was pretty conflicted when I watched this film because I am the son of a dam builder. That's right. I grew up in Seattle. My dad and his company, Constructors-Pamco, worked on the Grand Coulee Dam on the Columbia River and even the Glen Canyon Dam on the Colorado, each of which were featured in DamNation. I and my brothers also put ourselves through college working as laborers for Constructors-Pamco and my last two summers were spent raising, as in building up, not tearing down, the Spotted Lake Reservoir Dam in the Cascades just northeast of Seattle.

So, I am one of seven kids and we were all raised in the outdoors, boating, camping, hunting, and fishing on and alongside these rivers and reservoirs. Of course, growing up, we always viewed these projects as great feats of engineering which brought life to the very arid eastern Washington area. Towards the end of my dad's career, his company spent a couple of years at Glen Canyon Dam working on the water tunnels. This provided us the opportunity for several boating explorations on Lake Powell and if you've never been there, it is truly a wonder of the world, but at the expense of what? And that's what DamNation really brought to my attention.

So you can imagine the cognitive dissonance I was experiencing when I watched Patagonia's incredible documentary DamNation. So with my, and in hopes of bringing a little salvation to... I'm sorry, I'm going to stop right there. Jess is, I'm going to need an edit right there. I'm just going to go right to Vincent. So, let me finish that last line. So you can imagine the cognitive dissonance I was experiencing when I watched Patagonia's incredible documentary DamNation and I highly recommend you watching it.

With us today, the Director of Philosophy for Patagonia, who has been with them for 42 years, since their inception, Vincent Stanley. And Vincent is going to share with us their approach, their unique approach to storytelling. Welcome Vincent.

Vincent: Hi Park. Thanks and I'm actually kind of... I'm moved by your story about the cognitive dissonance between your experience of growing up and having respect and admiration and awe for the work done to build these immense dams. And then the feeling of conflict you have when you watched the film. I think one of the great things about the film is they were able to... the filmmakers were really able to capture why tree rivers are important. They really capture the feeling of it.

And it may be that we're going through... we're all going through, in our lifetime, a major shift in our attitude toward nature. The attitude that was very common when you were growing up and I was growing up, was to control the forces of nature that interfered with human health and human advancement. I think what we're seeing now is a moment of humility that all that work to control nature we have actually weakened its ability to sustain us and to sustain our own industrial systems because we have impoverished nature through our efforts to control it.

The shift that we have to have now is a sense of how are we going to work more as a part of nature, how are we going to use the forces of nature less aggressively and with less control so that it inhibits the actual health of nature. That is behind a lot of the... I think that shift in attitude is behind a lot of the work that we do at Patagonia. Cognitive dissonance was a great expression, I think, for you to use because we're still living with the old story. We still have... our whole economy is based around the idea of gross national product, the idea that anything we generate, any economic activity we generate is going to be good in itself rather than some economic activities that are actually possibly going to hurt us.

We're developing a new story, but we're still living with the old one and I think all of us suffer from that cognitive dissonance. One of the things that, and again, one of the things we're trying to do at Patagonia, is to try to tell the new story in compelling ways.

Park: And how does Patagonia own that? I mean, you have got all kinds of books, movies... really you started content marketing back in the '70s I think, with your catalogues, because Patagonia took a decidedly different approach to its catalogues without selling. It was more educating and bringing people along on stories. Can you tell us a little bit, since you've been there since the beginning, what are the elements of storytelling that Patagonia has held dear, that is in its DNA, even to this day?

Vincent: I think that one of the things that we did is we had a good story to tell from the start. Before we were a clothing company we were a mountain climbing equipment company that sold really wonderful climbing equipment. And then we went through this nature shift in 1972 when we realized the equipment we were making, these hard steel pitons, were actually damaging the rock. So we recommended to our customers that they shift to an entirely different kind of climbing gear which we also made, but it was a huge risk for us to invest in the tools and dies at that time.

We told the story in the catalogue. We said, "Listen, we created this revolutionary climbing equipment 15 years ago with hard steel pitons that you really need to switch to less damaging equipment and here's how you use this equipment." That change, that

catalogue that went out in 1972, changed the business overnight, from 70% steel pitons to 70% aluminum chocks that created less damage when they were used. I think that gave us the confidence that we could make a change if we treated our customers as friends, if we talked to them as friends and said, "Listen, this is the problem and this is the way to solve it," that we could have the confidence to do that.

So we had a good story to tell from the beginning and we had some confidence in how to tell it. We had far more confidence in that than we had in any kind of conventional marketing abilities because none of us came from a strong business background. So we really started out with that. I think that things have come full-circle, that now people are so good at marketing and everything has gotten so sophisticated that in some sense... when I advise young business people who are starting out a new company, I tell them don't be afraid of your own story. Really have a strong sense that every business has its own DNA, just like every person has their own DNA and their own story.

I think that people are often afraid to tell their story because they want to sound like the hip guys or the cool people in town and that their story doesn't measure up. But I think that's precisely where you go off because the more you tell it, the more you discover your own story, the more you uncover what's different about your business's story than any other businesses. You do a couple of things, you create a discipline for your business, you also create a marketing differentiation which is one of the big business problems that people have right now. When I'm talking with young entrepreneurs I'm trying to make that point. Figure out what your story is and don't be afraid of it and tell it strongly.

Park: Vincent, conflict plays a lot in that and in our last session of The Business of Story we talked quite a bit about the importance of conflict and tension to make a good story. I don't know if it's been your experience but I've seen this with a lot of companies in the business world, that people are afraid to talk about conflict within their own organizations and in their own markets. And yet when they do, it's freeing, not only for the individual but there seems to be more buy-in from the audiences because the audience appreciates your vulnerability and your transparency and ultimately your authenticity.

Can you talk a little about Patagonia and how you have been able to hold on to this very authentic story of Patagonia even in the face of falling down in a number of operational areas that you all willingly admitted to, but then you went to correct and moved your story forward?

Vincent: Yeah. I think conflict is critical. It is also critical in a time when the big story is changing, one that we discussed at the opening of the podcast, of our whole relationship to nature. Everything that everybody is doing now involves an enormous amount of anxiety and conflict, both environmentally and in terms of social systems.

One of the things that helped us create the Footprint Chronicles is that we were actually worried about people simplifying the story about Patagonia, about us becoming kind of a hero that people put up on a pedestal, when we knew in fact that we were just ordinary working folks. We are trying to make big changes but we are part of a larger industrial system. And some changes can be made quicker than others and some things are important to be called out, to say, "Listen, this is a problem here, we don't know what to do about it yet but this is what we think right now."

We did all that with Footprint Chronicles, partly to get our customers in on the complexity of making things. I think that's one of the problems with storytelling is that people often want a simple story and a story with a hero and a villain. In our experience, yeah there are heroes and villains, but far more often it's not that cut and dry. And that if customers expect you to be either a hero or a villain, it takes away from the capacity to actually make change. And it takes away from richer reality that you need to share with your customer in order to have an ongoing relationship with the customer, if that makes sense.

Park: Yeah. And for our listeners can you explain a little bit about what Footprint Chronicles is and where they can go and experience it?

Vincent: Yeah. They could go on our website. I've forgotten whether you can still go in through FootprintChronicles.com, but you can go to Patagonia.com and use Footprint Chronicles in the search field. It is... what we've done is take several products and to trace those products back to the suppliers, in some cases back to the mills or back to the farm or back to the sewing factory and then all the way to our warehouse in Reno. We began with five products in 2007, just sort of telling their story, and then we expanded it.

Park: Well that's great. Speaking of products and stories, I think this is a good time to take a quick break and let us introduce you to one of our wonderful sponsors of The Business of Story Podcast and we'll be right back with Vincent Stanley at Patagonia.

Okay Vince, we'll just take a short break here and Jess will edit in a live read and then I'm going to come back and talk a little bit about Patagonia as a purpose-driven marketer. So when you're ready we'll come right back into this. Three, two, one.

Welcome back to The Business of Story and Vincent Stanley of Patagonia. Now Vincent, I read in Fast Company magazine a couple months ago, there's a terrific article in there called "The Purpose-driven Marketer: How Patagonia Uses Storytelling to Turn Consumers into Activists." Can you tell us a little about the philosophy behind that and how do you actually go about using storytelling to turn consumers into activists?

Vincent: I think DamNation is a good example of where we are really working with our customer base, with our community base, to raise an issue and to get some action on it. We started doing this as you mentioned back 25 years ago in our catalogues, where we would talk about a particular issue, an environmental issue, that we didn't think had a lot of exposure. We would try to educate the customers of the time and then usually conclude the campaign with some kind of effort to get something done.

In the case of DamNation we're working to take down a series of dams on the Snake River. We submitted a petition to President Obama and this has been a tradition with us for about 25 years. We are now working more with film than we are with catalogue.

Park: And do you find your different storytelling techniques one works better than the other, and I mean, if we review them real quick, so you started in the catalogue business. And I know, Red Bull, for instance, gets rave reviews as a content marketer, but you all were doing this way longer than them. So I'm wondering if they're taking leads from you,

your catalogue, your website, the work that you've done with the Footprint Chronicles, how you were chronicling your supply chain and being very transparent.

The books you've written, you've got a couple of them out and by the way, The Responsible Company that you wrote with your founder is really a terrific read, The New Localism, I mean I go down the list... what story tactics do you seem to find work the best with your audiences these days?

Vincent: I don't know that there's one particular tactic. I think that one of the things we grapple with internally is that we have, at this point, we have a lot of stories to tell, both about product, in terms of innovation, and also what we're trying to do environmentally, so with a Traceable Down with Marina World being raised by farmers who are trying to regenerate the grasslands of Patagonia. We have a lot of product related stories and then we have some environmental issues that we are particularly passionate about and water is one of them.

I think that it's a good question and I'm not sure I know the answer. We got kind of a full... we try everything. Film is certainly... if you make a powerful film, that is certainly a great way to get things across.

Park: They don't even need to be as long as DamNation. That's a full featured documentary and it's brilliantly produced, beautifully shot by the way. But you had mentioned earlier your Traceable Down, little animated short that's about two minutes long. And for the listeners out there if you wanted to see a really very inventive way to talk about something as down and have fun doing it because they animated it to Blue Oyster Cult's Don't Fear the Reaper, just brilliantly done.

You also, in your local program that you're doing now, The New Localism, you've got three short films there that range from 2 minutes to 28 minutes and they tell remarkable stories in a very short amount of time. What are you finding is the attention span of your viewers and listeners these days?

Vincent: I think that attention spans are underrated. I think if you make a good film that you can do a longer film and that you can write a longer article and people will pay attention. Bears Ears, I think, has gotten quite a strong response, and a couple of the other films. The new Ramon Navarro film is getting an amazing response. That's the 28 minute film.

Park: Is that the fisherman down off Chile?

Vincent: Yeah, son of a fisherman. And one of the things that we're able to do now because we have, we're not a major retailer. But we do have about 30 stores across the U.S. and another 30 stores internationally, is to tie some of these campaigns in with our local stores so we can actually connect with our customers both through the catalog through the econ business and through the stores.

Park: And what advice over all the years that you've done this and like you said, I think it's very interesting that you came into this, not from a very trained business perspective but really just from an outdoors perspective. In fact, Yvon Chouinard, the founder's first book I think was Let My People Go Surfing: The Education of a Reluctant Businessman. That sounds kind of like that speaks to Patagonia. For our listeners, small businesses to

large businesses and content marketers, what are the two or three tips that you might share with them to help them make their stories resonate more with their audiences?

Vincent: I think first, make it specific. Don't talk to customers in terms of generalities. Tell your story. Figure out what your story is, then tell it. And it's not your competitor's story, it's not the company that you admire the most, it's not that story, it's the story of your particular enterprise. Those are the two major things that I would advise.

And the third thing, and this sounds a little abstract, to really treat customers as friends. If you figure the six degrees of separation story is true, which it is, your best bet in having a relationship with the customer is to assume that you're going to meet them on the street someday and/or have a coffee or a drink with them. The way that you talk with that customer should be the way you would talk to anybody else, a friend that you were trying to persuade of a particular point of view or to sell a particular product.

The only other thing is that I think that all of this advice works if you're making quality stuff or you're selling a quality service. If you're not, then it doesn't work so well and then I would look at kind of the basis of the business that you have. I do think that the future, the long range future for businesses is going to be higher quality goods and services. Certainly businesses that are supported by the stories they tell, the story has to be true.

Park: Great point. So tell your story. Know it. Own it. Tell your story. Treat your customers like your friends, the six degrees of separation, because you're going to run into them on the sidewalk whether you like it or not.

Vincent: Or run into you in social media.

Park: Exactly. Exactly. Or that virtual sidewalk and then produce the goods. Back up the stories you tell. Let's take one last break before our close and let's thank again another one of our terrific sponsors and we'll be right back with Vincent Stanley of Patagonia.

Okay. So we'll just take another five minutes or so Vincent, 10 minutes tops, something like that... whatever you feel comfortable with. I want to come back to this idea of telling that authentic goods story. I'll count us down here and away we go. Three, two, one.

Welcome back to The Business of Story and my special guest today Vincent Stanley, the Director of Philosophy at Patagonia. It's great having you here Vincent. You've been with Patagonia since the beginning and there's no better storyteller around really making consumers into activists, in my humble opinion anyways, than Patagonia.

Vincent, you've also been very kind in giving us, sharing your thoughts and insights with our class at Arizona State University. I teach a storytelling course in the executive master's for sustainability leadership there and you've done two terrific webinars with our students and our students are executives from around the world. A lot of them are coming in through finance, through operations, through the C suite, and they are changing, pivoting their course to do something more meaningful on their terms and that is to follow a path of sustainability.

My job in doing that is to introduce them to great storytellers like you and Patagonia and help them learn, much like our listeners, what you have experienced over the years. What worked and what doesn't work. One of the things that I hear time and time again from our clients at Park & Company, our agency, and our students is, "I don't really have a very interesting story to tell."

I think you touched on this a little bit earlier and what some people say to me, "Sure, that's Vincent Stanley. That's Patagonia. They have an amazing story to tell." But it wasn't that way in the beginning so how can you coach our listeners into finding that really unique, amazing story and sharing it?

Vincent: Well I think that involves a process of self-discovery on the part of the people who are in business. I've never met an entrepreneur who didn't have an amazing story. It's a matter of uncovering it and having confidence in it. It's hard to talk without specifics and I don't actually want to... I actually will tell a story. I've got two Yale students, they're at Yale Business School. They're a couple and they decided to create an organic cotton dress shirt business.

First of all, that's a story of how they came to be in the business and he used to be a dean at Harvard Divinity School. Almost everyone who is an entrepreneur has gotten into a business that's gone through some kind of interesting change. They are making these shirts of Egyptian cotton from an Italian specialty mill and then having them sewn in a factory in Fall River, Mass. that was basically saved by the employees. All of that is simple stuff and they're going to tell all that. But they might have had resistance to telling that.

I've got another couple of friends who have never told, that have been in business 20 years, they've never told their story. She's a designer who grew up on a farm in Iowa. He was a machinist who grew up in Salta, Argentina. They have this amazing little company that the outdoor industry has kept going for 20 or 30 years. They don't really... they think it feels too personal to them to reveal that.

My sense is that that's precisely the kind of thing that makes people want to do business with you, to understand something about why you are in business. If you're in business for good reasons or interesting reasons, if you really have a passion for the product you're making or the service you're offering, people connect to that. So I would figure out what it is and I would challenge... I think I could spend 10 minutes with anybody who said they had a boring story and tell them no it's not. There's no human being on the planet with a boring story.

Park: Exactly. One thing we find, Vincent, too, when we're digging down to find that story is we ask the person about that moment and they always look at me like, "What do you mean that moment?" There's always a moment in each of our lives that we have finally decided to take a stand on something that has been bothering us, typically conflict again, tension. It may be leaving a job, it may be starting a new business, it may be accepting a new job. But we're doing it because there's a moment in our life when we're finally, we're sort of fed up with the status quo and we wanted to go on our journey.

Do you have that moment in your life? I mean, when you think back, you've been with Patagonia a long time, when you started that company, is there a moment you can reflect upon that has led you all these years with the terrific brand of Patagonia?

Vincent: I think it's been ongoing. I came to the company intending to work for six months. I ended up staying for several different reasons. I think first of all it was an interesting challenge. It was a fun company just as a business to try and build in the early years. Then increasingly it has become interesting to me because of the environmental work and the development of that.

Then I became interested in, as you mentioned in The Responsible Company, one of the reasons I had for working on that [inaudible 00:32:39] is I was wondering how our culture had survived in some powerful way from when it was very small, 10 people and \$400,000 a year to what it is today.

It's been a series. There hasn't been a... in my life when I deal with a lot of my students, there's been a particular shift. They've gone through a certain career and they've taken a turn. They've decided to do something else. With me it's been more sort of threads. I've been, from the business side, I've been a writer and more and more I've been putting those two strains of my life together.

But I haven't had a turning point where I've gone to the left or the right or turned around. It's more that staying with the same company, it's been an experience that has deepened with time and has presented enough new challenges that it doesn't feel... I'm not waiting for my gold watch.

Park: Maybe titanium anyway.

Vincent: And their gold watches are too heavy anyway.

Park: Well Vincent with that I know you're very busy. By the way, when we first started this recording he had a whole wall of birds outside his New York hotel room, I guess, and they were tweeting away. We had to close that window because it was too loud, but I thought, "What an appropriate soundtrack backdrop sound effect for our interview today." But I wanted to thank you so much for your time. I know you're very, very busy and do you have any parting thought for us?

Vincent: No, thanks for having me on and I think it's great that you're doing this. In terms of, as a parting thought, kind of putting together your insight of conflict with what I've been talking about and kind of identifying the story. Is there a tension in your particular work, in your particular approach to what you're making or the service you're offering that really illustrates to your customer or potential customer what the benefit of your product or service is? Is there some kind of conflict there that can be illuminating? And don't be afraid of it.

Park: That's a great point and in fact that was a point that kind of resonated through our last show on The Business of Story so I appreciate that. At the end of these I always kind of like to wrap it up with a moral and I was going to start with a moral based off of the DamNation video, that the road to hell is paved with good intentions, that those folks didn't really mean to be doing the environmental damage they were doing. It was really meant to help humanity as best they can, but times have changed.

But I thought since talking with you that that was kind of a downer. So instead I would like to think about Joseph Campbell, America's foremost mythologist, and a line that I

often quote from him when he says, “We’re not on our journeys to save the world but to save ourselves and in that process we save the world.” And I think that’s what you’ve kind of talked about today when you’ve encouraged our listeners to really understand their own unique personal story, the universal truths within those and then be led by that into the world and go and make real change.

Vincent: All right. Nicely said. Thank you.

Park: Well thank you Vincent and thank you all for listening to this edition of The Business of Story. Please go to thebusinessofstory.com to download all kinds of different storytelling tools that you can use immediately to make your stories more engaging, more entertaining, more moving, and help you move your quest further faster.

Also, if you like what you’re hearing, please go to iTunes and leave a review for us. We’d appreciate that and of course share this knowledge because I’ve found that over the past 10 years when I’ve been out teaching story, that it first does start with your own internal story. It provides a North Star for us all to follow to go out and do meaningful work that impacts the world in great, great ways.

Again, thank you and I look forward to having you back on our next edition of The Business of Story. Thank you.