



Communications Digest

Because Good Copywriting Should Grow on Trees!

Welcome Mid-October!

With the warmth of Thanksgiving to buoy our spirits, I'm delighted to pen this issue of "Communications Digest."

In last month's issue, I wrote on maintaining health amidst the stress of professional demands, through the Buddhist teachings of Nhat Hanh and by addressing procrastination, from business writer Caroline Webb.

And from "Word Nerd's Corner," I turned to etymologist Bryan Garner to clarify that confusing case of "healthful" versus "healthy."

In this month's issue, I feature an article on what we can learn from entrepreneurial storytelling, as shared by professional storytelling consultant, Geoffrey Berwind (from "Forbes" magazine). I visit two women consultants on the impossibility of "multitasking" when one needs to focus. And in "Word Nerd's Corner," I visit friend and mentor Dani vanDriel's bugbear of usage--the case of "prioritize" versus "priorize."

Enjoy the fleeting weeks of autumn, especially the days when sunshine still outshines the grey and premature snow!

Sincerely,
Elizabeth

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Article One: Why does storytelling matter?

Storytelling and stories have become “buzz” phrases these days. But we shouldn’t ignore them as a passing fad. Storytelling is fundamental to human communication and therefore has earned its position as a mainstay in marketing and entrepreneurial exchange.

In a “Forbes” magazine online feature (“Tap the Power of Storytelling”), business writer Rodger Dean Duncan interviewed professional storytelling consultant and trainer, Geoffrey Berwind. Berwind has created storytelling projects for companies worldwide, not least Kennedy Space Center Visitor Complex, UNUM Global IT Leaders and thousands of business specialists who have wanted to make a stronger impact on their clients, prospects, management team and others.

The best speakers, writers, leaders, teachers, trainers/coaches and even parents, Duncan suggests, are all good storytellers. Here are some takeaways from his interview with Berwind on why storytelling matters and how we should harness its power for our own communications projects:

- **When asked, why is there so much buzz about the use of story in business communication**, Berwind says that the world of business has needed a form for communicating ideas or proposals, especially since PowerPoint has lost its influence and been declared as “dead.” We’ve needed alternatives to supplying data, numbers, statistics, analytics, and the like, to communicate growth or change. Berwind observes that Steve Jobs pioneered “the use of simple images and one line concepts to support his verbal storytelling.” We all know how TEDTalks have ignited people’s interest and attention, as “world-class speakers” speak in simple narratives, “using stories and powerful imagery to convey their message.”
- When asked **why should we use stories** when speaking **in business meetings**, Berwind observes that stories “*connect* us to our listeners. When we share our own real-life stories or the stories of others (Example or Proof stories),” our audiences feel that they’ve gotten to know us as “*authentic* people—people who have lives outside the corporate setting,

people who have struggled with problems and who have figured out how to overcome them.” Earning that authenticity enables people to “know, like, and trust” us. “Great leaders recognize that human connections need to go before concepts and strategies: connect first with your prospects, your audiences—*then* get down to business.”

- Montreal copywriter Nick Osborne has said that storytelling has a primal appeal to the human brain and Berwind similarly comments that “we are hard-wired to receive information . . . through storytelling. Stories trigger the ancient human muscle of the imagination.” We have gathered around campfires to listen to stories since our earliest history, notably hearing epic events of civilizations dating to Classical Greek and Rome, but transcending those cultural boundaries. Berwind comments that as “children, we learned through being told bedtime stories, fairy tales, . . . family stories around the dinner table. We became *story-listeners* when we were young.” So to harness the power of storytelling for leadership is to bring “audiences back to a natural state of . . .”
- He says that the right brain aspect of storytelling that requires creativity becomes a great vehicle for the “left-brain data-based information” that business people need to convey. That vehicle is “irresistible” and the influence and engagement” intensify, allowing “real change” to occur, “because people are [emotionally] moved to action.”
- He notes that there are a number of different story formulae that can be used: “A ‘Purpose Story’ is a big picture story that conveys a big idea.” If you want to illustrate how others resolved a problem, use “‘Example or Proof Stories.’” If you’re offering a “change-idea, craft a ‘What If?’ or ‘Imagine’ story.” Berwind refers to other formats, including “cautionary stories, teaching stores, inspirational stories, and your own everyday stories that make you more relatable to your audiences.”
- Sharing why you care about the work that you do can overcome the resistance of your audience and transform their understanding or knowledge. Berwind says that he encourages business professionals to answer the “Why I Do What I Do” question (to open a speech or presentation), before prescribing what, who, how and when of business that you recommend to others.

He also comments that the mastery of so-called “soft skills,” such as storytelling and story-based speech making, is increasingly becoming part of our business communications. The everyday and mundane paradoxically can give power to transform the way we think.

How can the principles and practice of storytelling build the work you do? Please reply on the “contact” page of my website. I’d be delighted to hear your stories!

Article Two: “Ask an Expert”—Are you lagging behind on your “to do” list? How to narrow your focus to accomplish more (with Amy Ballon & Danielle Botterell)

There are still entrepreneurs out there who think that multi-tasking is desirable, or that you can make decisions on every aspect of your business, while simultaneously honing in on a major issue—what business consultants Amy Ballon and Danielle Botterell call a “theme.”

The two Canadian friends and former business school students, who now advise entrepreneurs through Spark Consulting, argue rightly that if you want to “affect change” in one area, you must choose a single issue or “theme” and pursue that, subordinating all other issues as distractions until you complete the work you’re focused on.

Ballon and Botterell write that to allow one’s attention to be dispersed by many issues makes you “feel busy, busy, busy, but somehow never manag[ing] to accomplish the big-ticket items—the issues underpinning the formation and growth of [your] business.”

They recommend that entrepreneurs “avoid endlessly reacting” to distractions and work to manage time better and “delegate tasks” to reliable staff. They write: “We believe that setting a theme or a focus for a set period of time is the best way to simplify and limit time spent on decision-making while effectively creating change in your business.”

So whether you’re focused on innovation, or on increasing sales or on reducing costs or hiring, etc., make that one issue the primary focus, “as much as possible.” Evaluate only briefly the other tasks that arise in this time period, “decid[ing] whether they support your theme/focus or not and proceed accordingly.”

Whether the time you devote to that theme is a quarter of the year, or a shorter window, Ballon and Botterell urge us to remember the value of uninterrupted thought: “Imagine what you could get done if you even put your head down on one issue for a solid week.”

It doesn’t take management consultants from Toronto to tell us this. Painter, lifelong entrepreneur and COO of Failure Prevention Services, Bob Pitzel, has denounced “multitasking” as impossible, since I first met him in 2011.

Do you agree that multi-tasking undermines serious progress in your business’ development? Please respond on the “contact” page of my website (www.elizabethshih.com/contact). I’d be delighted to extend this conversation.

WORD NERD'S CORNER: The case of "prioritize" vs. "priorize"



Reader, mentor and friend Dani vanDriel wrote in to lament the confusion between “prioritize” and “priorize.” Etymologist Bryan Garner writes that “prioritize,” which dates to the mid-1960s, is an example of “bureaucratic baffle-gab.” He says that the following sentence—“The rate at which an objective is achieved should reflect the degree to which that component of the plan has been prioritized”—would be better written thus: “Do the most important things first” (638).

Garner notes that some writers will use more conservative constructions in place of “prioritize”—such as “set priorities,” or “establish priorities.” These alternatives are not more verbose, but in fact are clearer (more precise) than grammatical constructions that use “prioritize.” “Prioritize” raises questions about which grammatical subject and object are in use, when writers use it. Garner writes (in 2003): “In time . . . ‘prioritize’ might lose its bureaucratic odor. But that time has not yet arrived” (638).

I’m sorry to say that often those who use “prioritize” do not notice that the “bureaucratic odor” of its imprecision persists. Garner writes that the separate term, “priorize,” is an “illogically formed Canadianism,” citing the following example: “Two months later, not only must a prospective comrade share all of our “isms”; s/he must also priorize them [should read: view their relative importance] exactly as we do’ ” (“Canadian Dimension,” 19 Sept. 1997, 3, my emphasis; Garner 638).

This error has grown from being “fairly obscure” in Garner’s estimation (2003) to being frequent in common conversation and business communication, as Dani has aptly reported. Using “prioritize” and the error “priorize” can land one in a hornet’s nest: Garner notes that “writers with sound stylistic priorities avoid these words” (638). But business writers will likely call him a purist.

Do you have language bugbears to share? Please tell me about them on my “contact” page. I’d be delighted to share them in upcoming postings.

SHOP NEWS



Particular thanks this month to mentors from various business organizations, who have launched the new program year:

A "shout out" to Lori Jestin-Knaus, who leads both skillfully and empathetically the entrepreneurial conversations of the "Mentoring Circle" (of Women Entrepreneurs of SK);

To Bob Pitzel of the Raj Manek Mentorship Program, for his always discerning insights on entrepreneurship and for his remarkable generosity. Check out his astonishing watercolour painting at www.bpitzel.com ;

To Monica Kreuger, who shares with me an ongoing conversation that identifies the joy of entrepreneurship and who has blazed a trail that many of us are honoured to follow;

To Dani vanDriel, for sharing that is no less wise for being caring. It's a joy to see her artistic gifts at work.

And to Wilf Popoff, man of letters, whose discernment as a writer and editor continues to inspire me.

Thank you also (in no particular order) to fellow women of the Freelancers' Roundtable Group which I convene--Ashleigh Mattern, Julie Barnes, Katherine Duncombe and Leanne Bellamy. The support and friendship we share are great, even if we've had to postpone our collaborative writing project (busy lives)!

ABOUT US

Since 2011, Elizabeth Shih Communications has provided B2B marketing and communications services on the Prairies and across Canada.

Do you need help telling your story of an entrepreneur or company?

Please contact me through my website, via the CASL-compliant email form, on the right-hand side of each page (www.elizabethshih.com).

After I have received your permission, I'll be pleased to discuss projects with you!

I specialize in entrepreneurial storytelling that chronicles, especially through case studies and eNewsletters, the success stories of organizations (and small companies) against the odds.

Please visit my website for more information (www.elizabethshih.com).

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