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Communications Digest

Because Good Copywriting Should Grow on Trees!

Welcome Mid-July

With summer in full bloom (and many people taking annual holidays), I'm pleased to send you another issue of "Communications Digest."

In last month's issue, I visited *Elle* (Australia), where yoga director, Kate Kendall, explained the difference between mindfulness and meditation. These are two concepts that are sometimes used interchangeably, when in fact they are distinct. Thank you to those of you who found the article helpful and wrote in to say so.

In this month's issue, I visit Montreal Copywriting guru, Nick Usborne, on his theories of storytelling in marketing and make a bold connection that shows how fundamental storytelling really is--not least when applied to serious issues, such as end-of-life decision making, in the writing of Atul Gawande.

Although reading Gawande's best known book, *Being Mortal*, has preoccupied me for part of the month, I am finding *resilience* and *joy* in the time I spend with friends and colleagues, participating in Saskatoon's festival season.

To my faithful readers: enjoy the beauty of high summer and savour the sunshine for the year ahead!

Sincerely,
Elizabeth

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Article One: How storytelling about serious (even end-of-life) issues can inform business writing . . .

Just as “resilience” has become virtually a buzz word in business communication (something I will address in my future ebook, *Keep Going*), many communicators have returned (not for the first time) to discuss “stories” and “storytelling,” as I do when I promote my services to prospects.

The well-known marketer, copywriter and coach Nick Osborne (of Montreal), blogged recently on the components of stories that sell. He has noticed a “surge in the number of companies jumping on the ‘story’ bandwagon.”

But he’s concerned to find that few contemporary “stories” actually get down to the business of telling them. He writes: “If you want to tap into the true power of storytelling in your marketing, you have to actually tell and share a real story.” It’s not enough to be entertaining.

Osborne identifies three components to true storytelling:

- (1) A story centres on an event or something that happens. This means that you’ll have one or more characters, and, as Aristotle wrote in *The Poetics*, a plot needs to have a “beginning, middle and an end.”
- (2) You must make the reader care about what happens. In other words, the story has to appeal to the reader’s empathy, “engaging the reader in a meaningful way.” The reader wants to feel a connection to someone and their story, but if you fail to create that, your communication will fail.
- (3) A story must contain “a learning moment” or message. It may be enough to entertain a viewer in a movie. But in business, a story doesn’t work if it doesn’t make a point. The reader needs to feel “one or more emotions,” Osborne writes, from which they find a purpose, “‘get’ the message” and feel compelled “to take an action.”

I recently attended a conference in Ontario where amongst many issues pertaining to women and spirituality, there was a talk given on suffering and end-of-life issues. These have been much in the press in recent years, as countries like Canada contemplate if, how, when and why physician assisted death should become legal.

Now this may seem far afield from the world of business communication and marketing. But engaging with life altering issues such as this one can illustrate the fundamentally human origins

of ancient forms and principles that business writers still use to sell our services. (Aristotle wrote *The Poetics* in 350 BCE.)

I was reminded of how much more breadth for stories and storytelling exists when one leaves cheap movies or pulp fiction to read books like Atul Gawande's *Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End* (Toronto: Random House, 2014).

In it, the physician author discusses the importance of allowing terminally ill patients to “die in one’s own way” (to paraphrase Freud in “Beyond the Pleasure Principle,” in 1920). I wouldn’t suggest that one openly take on this concept to sell tooth-cleaning, real estate services or personal coaching. But pondering these difficult topics through a fundamental lens like storytelling can drive any artist’s or creative’s thinking, interest and creativity.

Here are a few lines from Gawande. He writes:

“I am leery of suggesting the idea that endings are controllable. No one ever really has control. Physics and biology and accident ultimately have their way in our lives. But the point is that we are not helpless, either. . . . We have room to act, to shape our *stories*, though as time goes on it is within narrower and narrower confines. A few conclusions become clear when we understand this: that our most cruel failure in how we treat the sick and the aged is the failure to recognize that they have priorities beyond merely being safe and living longer; that the chance to shape one’s *story* is essential to sustaining meaning in life.” (243 my emphasis)

That’s an intensely powerful insight for anyone, including marketers and communicators. We needn’t be selling funeral plots or life insurance to find this interesting. (This kind of story centres on something happening in a big way—terminal illness and death. It also creates empathy, as few of us have *no* experience with death in one’s family or peer group. And Gawande certainly has a purpose to the story he’s telling—stressing that institutionalized medicine needs to pay more attention to patients’ roles in their own deaths.)

He goes on to say that the terminally ill may wish more to share memories, make peace with others and/or with God, settle legacies and so on, rather than to receive a blast of the latest chemotherapy available.

Human beings tend to seek conversations or therapy for our lives, writes psychoanalyst Adam Phillips, which become “transitional languages” that we turn to, “when [our] narratives have stopped or become too painful,” and when we want to “restore the loose ends and beginnings to the story” (Phillips 8). These efforts return power to us as storytellers of our own lives.

Exploring some of the deep thinking that authors, physicians and psychoanalysts engage in can lend an unexpected depth and value to the storytelling that I as a business writer do.

Do you find Atul Gawande's insights on the stories of one's life to be compelling and important? Please write on the "comment" page of my website at www.elizabethshih.com. I'd be delighted to hear from you.

WORD NERD'S CORNER: The troubling case of "pleaded," "plead" and "pled"



Mentor and friend, Humboldt watercolourist Bob Pitzel wrote me, some weeks ago, to report that he's noticed (and felt) confusion over the way that the past tense of the verb "to plead" (i.e. the participles "pleaded," "pled" or "plead") are being used. Usage has been inconsistent in common conversation and in the press.

American etymologist Bryan Garner reports, in *Garner's Modern American Usage*, that the past participial verb forms of "pled" and "plead" (which are pronounced identically, as is the case with "read") are common in the US. So in American usage (and often for us as Canadians), you will hear two past participles for this verb: "I pled guilty when I went to court over the parking ticket," and "I plead innocent when my neighbour complained that my dog was destroying his lawn . . ."

By contrast, in the UK, "pleaded" is used as the past participle and "pled" is considered to be an Americanism. "Plead" as a past participle is viewed by the editors of the *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* to be a further example of an Americanism or a dialectical version of the verb.

So when among Canadians influenced by UK language habits (or who have studied there), you will hear "pleaded." Otherwise, in North America, we are likely to continue to hear both "pled" and "plead" as past participles of the verb.

I hope this resolves the confusion, Bob, or more likely that Garner's explanation makes people's inconsistent usage a bit more tolerable! Thanks for writing in!

Do you have questions of word use and misuse? Please share them with me on the "contact" page of my website. I'd be delighted to extend this conversation. .

SHOP NEWS

A final thank you and nod to Women Entrepreneurs of SK's Business Advisor, Lori Jestin-Knaus, and fellow members of the W.E. Mentoring Circle, for the past three years of meaningful conversations and support. Although I recently decided to move on, I am grateful to Lori and fellow entrepreneurs for their sharing, insights and caring. I know our paths will continue to cross.

Thank you also (in no particular order) to fellow women of the Freelancers' Roundtable Group which I co-created--Ashleigh Mattern, Katherine Duncombe, Julie Barnes, Leanne Bellamy and Amy Rederburg and Katee Pederson. Some of us are resurrecting our earlier hope to contribute to a collaborative writing project. Discussions are in-progress.

And Ashleigh will be one of the subjects of my second ebook, this time on resilience, to be released next winter. Meantime, these women's writing and editing continue to inspire and engage me.

And another hearty thanks to Saskatoon's best editor, Wilf Popoff, for some very timely advice on how to negotiate unexpected contracts under difficult circumstances. I certainly hope that Wilf prepares his memoirs, as there is so much fellow freelancers can learn from him!



ABOUT US

Since 2011, Elizabeth Shih Communications has chronicled the stories of marketing and communications on the Prairies and across Canada.

Do you need help telling your entrepreneurial stories?

Please contact me through my website, via the CASL-compliant contact 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 tell stories of how entrepreneurs succeed and at the same time give back to their communities. I do so through **ebooks, articles, press releases, blog postings and more.** And new to 2017: I now edit resumes, business plans and award applications (ABEX, SABEX and more).

Do you need help telling the stories of your business or organization?

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