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Power of Story

By Justin Cohen

The success of our business depends on the kinds of stories our customers tell about us.



Approximately 80% of all buying decisions are made after hearing a story from a satisfied customer. Your profitability depends on the stories that your customers tell about you. Hey, did I tell you about this hotel I stayed in when I was last in Cape Town? It's called 'Extreme Hotel' everything about it is extreme. As you walk in there're these massive chandeliers hoisted to the ceiling with climbing rope. Walk into one lift and it's decked out as a divers cage with sharks bashing their noses through the bars. The other lift makes you feel like you're in a cable car going up Table Mountain. And the toilets are all themed differently, one is called stage fright, the whole bathroom is painted with an audience of people looking at you while you do your business. The smoking area is called the "coughinroom". You sit on a big white leather topped coffin. The ceiling is painted with all these people looking down, crying into your grave.'

Think you might want to try Extreme Hotel Cape Town?

The success of our business depends on the kinds of stories our customers tell about us. Great stories take you by surprise. If every hotel looked like Extreme Hotel, there'd be no story. If you want people's attention you've got to give them something different. You can do it through exceptional customer service, notice the word "exceptional" that means giving them a surprise, like sending a hand written thank you note. Often it happens when something goes wrong.

I haven't told you about my LG laptop?

I bought it because they're really good PC's. Actually I bought the story, "LG, Life's good" I love that story. The only problem was just about every day the laptop would just shut its self down, what ever I was working on—gone. I took it in five times they couldn't fix the problem. Eventually I asked the sales manager to replace it. "Sorry," he said, "it's too near to the end of the guarantee." "But the guarantee's still valid?" I said. "Yes," he replied, "but it's too near the end." Huh? What, like my guarantee just entered old age, so it can't do the things it used to? Life's good? No, Life's Gone. Work gone, guarantee gone, laptop gone – thrown off high-rise building. That's the kind of story you don't want your customers telling.

Truth is, we all mess up. I mess up. Things go wrong. In fact most stories are about things going wrong. And that's your opportunity. When something goes wrong, you get the chance to be a hero.

Imagine that even after the fifth time I brought it in, LG had replaced the laptop and sent me a hand written card to apologize for the inconvenience along with a R50 voucher for any other LG product? They would have sold an extra product, kept me as a life-long customer and I would've had the best kind of story to tell, one with a happy ending. One that would no doubt have won them a whole lot more LG customers.

You can screw up, just give them a happy ending, that turns them into marketing storytellers for you. Each of your customers has about two hundred people in their sphere of influence, these people are your true advertisers. Conventional advertising is also story telling. Problem is advertisers are ranked as only slightly more honest than used car salesmen. No offence to advertisers or used car sales people, that's just a researched fact. We don't want to hear from the guy who gets paid to say how great you are, we want to hear from the guy who pays you. Remember, 80% of our buying decisions are made after hearing a story from a satisfied customer. Here is a simple recipe to get great stories.

- 1) Be great. There's no replacement for excellence.**
- 2) Give them a memorable story. Do something different.**
- 3) After they've told you how great you are, ask for a testimonial.**
- 4) Keep the stories alive. Send them to prospects and clients. Stick them up in your foyer. Put them on your website.**

Outsurance is perhaps the best example of a South African company doing this, assuming they are truly as great as whose handpicked customers have been telling us. Justin Cohen is a professional speaker and author of four books and seven audiobooks. This article is based on his book "The Astonishing Power of Story."