

# The Narrative Arc: Stories tell it all

Stories are impactful, inspirational and powerful, and are filled with information that often eludes the metrification of a quantifying, numbers-hungry corporate America.

Once upon a time...

By **Steve Harvill**

Let me tell you a story. Better yet, let me tell you a story about a story.

There once was a man named Diego Scotti, who was vice president of international marketing for American Express. Because he was a smart man, he conducted in-depth research on his clients, whom he termed “people of substance.”

In the breadth of his study, various metrics were developed. In the heart of the numbers was a gem of information that easily could have gone undiscovered because it was not represented as fact and did not have a hard numeric value. Sitting beneath the cascade of data was this simple fact: People of substance wanted their information delivered in stories. They wanted to be told the advantages of membership, the features and the value of their American Express relationships in good old-fashioned stories.

What appeared to be a mere side effect of the study was not lost on Scotti. In fact, it jump-started his imagination. What if he could, in a unique and powerful way, utilize storytelling as a marketing foundation? Thus was born the “my life, my card” advertising campaign, which has become one of the most memorable and successful advertising campaigns in recent memory.

The idea was to engage celebrities and have them tell their stories, with a sole predetermined outcome: “This is my life ... and my card is American Express.” Robert DeNiro, Ellen DeGeneres, M. Night Shyamalan, director Wes Anderson and surfer Laird Hamilton already have told their stories.

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## Telling a story

In 1958, shortly after NASA was formed, the agency sent its engineers into neighborhood schools to tell the story of a new frontier. These visits were designed to give engineers an opportunity to practice the agency's pitch, as well as provide inspiration for schoolchildren. One of those children was George Bennett. The stories he heard at school filled him with a wonder of space and the cosmos that would dominate his life. For Bennett, who is senior principle engineer for Extravehicular Activity (EVA) at Boeing, the story led to a lifetime passion.

The history of storytelling is as old as man. From the earliest social gatherings around the communal fire, someone was telling a tale about the sheer size of the mastodon that narrowly escaped his spear.

In 1977, R.R. Bowker outlined the humble beginnings of storytelling that surrounded play activities. Stories moved to a more critical role in the construct of religion, then to history and on to education. It became the device for recording our activities and filled our need to explain the world that surrounded us. The storyteller was a heroic figure in history and created the "bardic" tradition from which William

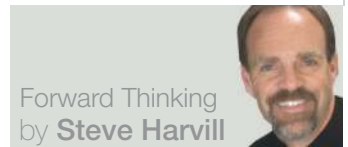
Shakespeare arose.

Storytelling defines our humanity and provides us with wisdom, tradition and the transfer of knowledge. The oral tradition gives us a method of transference, a way to discover significance and a sadly ignored aspect of success in the American business community.

## Find your narrative

Creative Ventures offers a strategic platform called the Narrative Arc, which is designed to take advantage of the critical information contained in the stories of an organization. The Narrative Arc is a real process — a soft and somewhat open systemic approach to gathering critical information. By tapping the rich well of information in stories, clients often find strategic advantages over competitors.

When organizations pursue their best practices, they generally follow an objective approach, creating a series of metrics that takes into account everything from the number of cold calls necessary to generate a sale to the correct percentage of cost to revenue. They know the numbers inside and out, but when tracking successful offices or people, they discover obvious gaps in their



measurements.


The Narrative Arc helps fill in the gaps. Here is how it works:

- **A tool is created in collaboration with a client.** The tool is the questions that will be used to build the Narrative Arc and form the borders of the system. "How many existing-client sales calls do you make each day?" is a question designed to generate a metric and would not be part of the Narrative Arc. "Tell me how you construct an average day" is a Narrative Arc question. Although the question appears to be open ended, it has borders. It allows participants to expand their stories however they want, as long as each story remains within the "average day." How the question is worded is critical to the type of information being gathered.

- **Stories are shared.** The next step is the interviewing of key contacts who directly relate to the project's goals. These interviews are story sessions.

- **Analysis is conducted.** What is the purpose of this entire exercise? It is to identify impact points and find the patterns that exist in the stories. These patterns form a clear picture of non-quantifiable intangibles that can make a difference in the pursuit of success.

- **Good impact points are repeated.** Many impact points will be specific to a certain person or office culture, and will be difficult to repeat across product or office lines. They are significant and deserve to be leveraged, but they will not transfer to the entire organization. On the other hand, some points are repeatable. They can bridge office cultures and product lines. These are the Narrative Arc gems. These repeatable successful acts (RSAs) can become core strategy in moving a company forward.

The power that lies in focused storytelling is as old as mankind, and its useful application to the stoic numeric principles that drive business is being ignored. By expanding your sphere of understanding, by capturing the intricacies that lie in the narrative process, you can add the key link to building a complete strategy that will move your company from the leading to the cutting-edge of your industry. 

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