

Storytelling as a Business! *It Ain't Just Story!*

By Linda Gorham, Storyteller

League for the Advancement of New England Storytelling (LANES) Museletter, October 2004

When I first started playing tennis, I wouldn't wear a skirt. Simply put, in my mind, I wasn't good enough to deserve the specialty attire. I wore T-shirts and shorts. And I told people "I just play *a bit* of tennis." Only when I got good and felt I warranted the outward expression of 'tennis-dom,' did I go out and buy coordinated tennis outfits and announce to the world that "Yes, I play tennis! And by the way I play on a traveling team!" By then I had earned the right to claim my stake in the tennis world and the right to dress the part.

The same thing happened to me with storytelling. In the beginning, I didn't think I deserved the "storyteller" title, and I sure didn't look the part. My storytelling acknowledgement started with "I just tell *a couple* of stories." Later it expanded to "I tell *some* stories." Eventually my confidence grew and I could say out loud, "I am a storyteller." And much later it evolved into "I own a small business; it is the business of storytelling!" (*And yes, my outfits became appropriately more elaborate at every step of the transformation.*)

So what did this paradigm shift mean to me? It meant I accepted that what I did as a storyteller was a whole lot more than "just telling a couple of stories" just as my tennis game ultimately became more than "just playing a bit." I acknowledged that my efforts were as comprehensive as any other small business owner, and I began to approach my work more efficiently and in a more businesslike manner.

The first thing I did was to explore the world of marketing. Hey, what good is having a bunch of stories if no one knows who you are, right? I read many marketing books cover to cover. This was not simple reading, this was preparing for a test – a test of what I could incorporate into my own business. I wrote in the margins. I used post-it notes. I put creases in the pages. I made copies of important pages and put them in a marketing to-do file. I suspect I never studied that hard in college or in graduate school.

Then I started thinking, brainstorming and planning. This is where my thirteen years of corporate experience helped. What did I want to do as a storyteller? Where did I see myself five, ten, fifteen years in the future? What kind of identity did I want? What kind of stories should I tell? Who should my audiences be? Where did I want to tell? What regions? What states? What countries? What should I do first? Second? Third? What are my wildest storytelling dreams? What should I want to wear on stage? (*Yes, I'm still into looking good!*)

In going through this process, I had to take a serious look at what all of this meant in terms of my own commitment. So years ago, I developed a list of my job duties as the owner of a small business, one that happens to be the business of telling stories. After the initial shock of "Do I do that?" I felt empowered. At least I now knew the challenges that I was facing.

Since I'm in charge, I started by giving myself the top dog title, "CEO." Why not? Chief Executive Officer – that means I do the telling – sometimes the only job I would like to have. But, of course, there's a whole lot more. If you don't believe me, read on:

Chief Executive Officer

Storyteller

Public Affairs Department

Editorial Staff

Writer

Editor

Contract designer

Layout specialist

Donations Coordinator

Free program coordinator

Giveaway coordinator

Advertising, Marketing & Publicity Staff

Newsletter designer and writer

Web site designer and writer

Resume designer and writer

Media kit designer and stuffer

Contract negotiator

Marketing plan designer

Press release writer

Grant writer

Outreach letter writer

Program description writer

Image Consultant

Clothing and accessories purchaser (yes, it really is important to look good!)

Manicure and haircut scheduler

Investment Department

Chief investment officer

Banker

Community Affairs Department

Guild and organization membership coordinator

Television and radio appearances coordinator

Tradeshow/showcase coordinator and booth designer

Comptrollers Department

Accountant and tax planner

Systems Department

Computer specialist and Helpline supervisor

Research and Development Department

Creator of new stories

Researcher and librarian

Critic and analyst

Vocal coach

Planning Department

One-year projection planner
Five-year projection planner
Brainstormer
Dreamer

Purchasing Department

Supply clerk
Software and hardware purchaser
Books, videos and audio tapes purchaser
Office equipment purchaser

Education Department

Teacher and consultant
Workshop designer
Handout designer and producer
Theme planner

Reference Department

Calendar manager
Files manager
Mailing list manager

Mailing Department

Stuffer
Labeler
Envelope lick and stamper
Post office runner

Copying Department

Copy girl

Now, I do get help. I use performance coaches, accountants, marketing coaches, plus a CD and a web site producer. I also get invaluable advice from storytelling friends and small business owners in other disciplines. But basically it's my company and it's my responsibility to see that everything gets done – and hopefully done well. Now ask yourself, are you already doing these things? Did you ever see them in list form? Does this depress you? Does it energize and inspire you? I hope the latter. If nothing else, perhaps this list will alter your personal storytelling paradigm and give you a new perspective on what you have been doing all along, or what you will be doing as you get more and more entrenched in this business.

Remember the old commercial, "It Ain't Just Paint?" Well, folks, if you didn't know it already, get ready for one more truth, "It Ain't Just Story!"