

## Finding Clients by Telling Stories

On the morning of Halloween 2003, 13-year-old Bethany Hamilton was surfing close to her home on the island of Kauai. Bethany had big plans. She was training for her next surf competition, a stepping stone for bigger things—perhaps even a national title one day. Sitting out in the lineup, she paused for a moment, waiting for her wave with her left arm dangling in the warm, Kauai water. In an instant a 14-foot tiger shark rose from the deep, clamped its jaws around her arm just below her shoulder and sped off as quickly as it had appeared. That moment changed everything for Bethany. Her life was saved that day due to a makeshift, surf leash tourniquet and some quick thinking friends and bystanders. However, her surfing career seemed to be over. At least, that's what everybody thought—everybody but Bethany.

Within a year, she was back in the water, and by 2007, she'd won her first national title. By 2011, Bethany was the subject of a popular film, *Soul Surfer*, which chronicled her life and her accident. The film almost didn't get made, but Bethany's determination and focus made it a reality. Bethany knew her story was compelling, but she also knew it was much deeper than "girl meets shark and then gets back in the water."

Peter Guber, famous film producer and author of *Tell to Win*, tells how he passed on the project. In Guber's words, "(they) talked numbers and budgets. I was unmoved. Nobody says, 'Hey, let's go down to the AMC theater, I hear there's a film there that came in on budget.'"

### But the story continues...

One afternoon, Bethany Hamilton showed up on Guber's doorstep. Guber was impressed not only with Hamilton's self-confidence and drive but with the place from which her passion emanated. She explained that the loss of her arm helped her to see her bigger purpose in life. Guber assumed she meant becoming a national surf champion, but her purpose was bigger than that. "No, my purpose from God," she explained. "To help others know God's love. I want my story to inspire others to never give up, no matter what. That's why I hope this movie gets made."

Bethany's story was not only more compelling than the producer's budget figures, Guber remembered: "I realized it would appeal to a wide audience—teens, surfers, *Jaws* fans, religious believers, and the business folks needed to bring the movie into the marketplace."

Bethany won him over with her story, not the story about the shark bite, the story about her wider purpose, her elevation not just as a surfer but as a human being.

### Why Stories

As Bethany Hamilton and Peter Guber have discovered, ever since Eve ate the fruit, Noah filled the ark, and the Trojans let in the horse, stories have been the way we learn, remember, and inspire. Today, businesses and professionals are also finding that stories are an impactful way to connect with audiences. The trend is to use storytelling in business development, presentations, and meetings, as well as to motivate employees or even to present complex research.

Stories capture attention and create empathy. They do this, according to [Jane Praeger](#), faculty member in Columbia University's M.S. programs in strategic communications, by making complex issues and concepts relatable and understandable. Stories diminish skepticism. In [a recent post by Joan Dowling](#), Jane claims that people are less likely to be defensive or counter-argue when a concept is delivered through a story. Science backs this up. [Scientific studies by Paul Zak](#) conclude that good, character-driven stories actually cause the brain to produce oxytocin, which increases trust, generosity, charitability, and compassion. Stories are also great for helping people adopt a new idea.

Through stories, emotions that can help inspire decision-making are engaged. Stories can be applied in almost any environment and topic, and they make concepts memorable. In other words, stories “stick.”

Stories are a great way to talk about your firm or your colleagues. A good story can make the difference in selling your firm and selling your services to a prospective client. The right story at the right time can put you ahead of your competition and seal a new engagement.

I've created an acronym (SHED) as a simple way to remember key elements of good stories so you can use stories in your approach to prospective clients.

### ***SHED: Simple, Honest, Emotional, and Directed***

**Simple** – Good stories:

- Are easy to understand
- Contain language, tone, and a narrative that matches the target audience
- Easy to recall later when needed
- Have been stripped of non-essentials and simplified
- Have been practiced and re-worked so all the elements work together

**Honest** – Honest doesn't mean a story has to be true, but they must be:

- Relatable
- Genuine
- Transparent
- Authentic

**Emotional**

- The best stories lead you through a variety of emotions. If your audience both laughs and cries you've tapped into an impressive emotional range.
- Sample emotions are: happy, amused, sad, empathetic, fearful, angry, joyful, disgusted, and trusting.
- These emotions can be evoked through anticipation, struggle, suspense, expectation, and surprise.

**Directed** – Stories need a purpose, an objective. Three story objectives in the business world are:

- Branding – stories that build trust around the speaker or another person or group
- Convincing – stories that drive someone to action by convincing them to do something
- Capturing attention – stories that draw an audience in, making them willing to pay attention to subsequent key learnings

Next time you really want to make an impact, consider ditching the bullet-pointed PowerPoint, and tell a compelling story.