21 Ways an *Undeniable Story* Can Make a Difference

STORY 10X
TURN THE IMPOSSIBLE
INTO THE INEVITABLE

You want to tell the right story for the future you want to create. When you learn the three basic steps to an *Undeniable Story*, you can use them to achieve a wide range of desired outcomes. What gets you to advance from contributor to manager to leader is not your functional excellence. It's your ability to master communications. The best leaders are the best storytellers. When you craft an *Undeniable Story,* you can...

1 Create a strategic narrative that brings everyone together
2 Get executive buy-in for your vision, strategy, and roadmap
3 Secure capital from investors and/or next-level sponsorship
4 Clarify the business case and value of what you do
5 Convey the potential of a disruptive technology
6 Successfully deliver on the promise of transformation
7 Create alignment across cross-functional teams
8 Translate a product roadmap into a big-picture story
9 Legitimize your work and progress in a quarterly business review
10 Overcome obstacles and resistance to change
11 Turn data into insights that influence decision-making
12 Shift perceptions on a complex and divisive issue
13 Recruit the hard-to-hire talent that can accelerate your business
14 Turn your ideas into thought leadership that shapes the conversation
15 Create a sense of belonging that leads to high-performance culture
16 Demonstrate empathy and care for the people you serve
17 Develop the executive presence needed to navigate in uncertain times
18 Unite diverse stakeholders around shared common interests
19 Influence even when you don't have the formal authority
20 Advance your career on senior management track
21 Turn the impossible into the inevitable

Discovering Your Superhero Origins

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Superheroes capture our imaginations for a reason. Think of your personal favorites: Black Panther, Wonder Woman, Iron Man. They each have an epic origin story of how they came into their powers. Few superheroes are born superheroes. It's through trials and circumstances, and the choices they make in response, that they discover who they truly are.

Take Bruce Wayne, for example. He was a young child of seven when he saw his parents murdered by a mugger in a dark alley. In that moment, he vowed to spend the rest of his life (and his family's fortune) to right the scales of justice. It took him years of searching, training, and mentoring to find and fulfill his rightful destiny as Batman. Gotham would never be the same.

Okay, you're not a superhero. Neither am I. But every one of us has an epic origin story of how we came to see the world as we do.

The author and anthropologist Simon Sinek reminds us to "start with why." Why do you do what you do? Why are you where you are today? Why are you passionate about it?

To tell your why story without sounding self-indulgent, you must take the ordinary and celebrate the extraordinary within it.

Take 10 to 15 minutes to write out your answers to the following questions. You'll be surprised by what emerges.

We often forget to connect the dots about where we come from and how our early experiences shape how we see the world and what motivates us. Don't worry if you don't get it perfect. In our storytelling workshops, we encourage people to share a 90-second story based on the material they uncover. But you could spend a lifetime decoding the tea leaves of your past.

The key is to simply celebrate the gifts of your origins. Whether it's been easy, or more likely full of struggle and challenges to overcome, there is power in your past. In fact, the greatest source of untapped power is the part of your story that is unreconciled. Try to make friends with the twists and turns. No story is ever a straight line.

Where were you born and raised?

What have been the biggest risks you've taken?

Who were your parents?

What are three to five of the most defining moments in your life?

What have you studied in life?

What about your early origins explains your why today?

What have you been most curious about?

What do you geek out on? What are your hobbies/ interests?

Ahead of Your Time

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The challenge that you may face when inventing the future is that you're ahead of your time. People don't believe the data you have to show. People are afraid to leave behind the comfort of the status quo.

Why? Because the existing storyline, the dominant thought of the time, has too strong a hold on their beliefs.

Take a moment to think about your answers to the questions below.

When have you felt ahead of your time?

Have you ever struggled to describe something so obvious to you, yet everyone else stares at you with suspicion or disbelief?

How can you frame your story in a way that will be embraced instead of rejected?

Describe the Convergence of Forces

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Take a moment to assess the convergence of forces—technological, economic, and cultural—at work in your business and put them into context for your audience. Make a list of at least three items for each of the three forces and use them to tell your *Undeniable Story*.

Technological forces (such as hardware and software)

1

2

3

Economic forces (such as lower costs and greater availability)

1

2

3

Cultural forces (such as new social values and emergent trends)

1

2

3

Old Story / New Story

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Frame the change in contrast of then and now. In this exercise, you'll have a chance to practice.

In the left column, describe the Old Story based on a series of keywords, phrases, values, and mindsets. And in the right-hand column, do the same, trying to match the Old Story words to their New Story equivalents.

The example that follows is built around a company that has completely disrupted the hospitality industry: Airbnb. Consider how Airbnb has created a New Story, with a product so compelling that it has garnered a $38 billion valuation and a market cap that out paces Marriott or Hilton. Despite the fact that Airbnb doesn't even own real estate. That's an *Undeniable Story* in action.

Example: Airbnb

OLD STORY	NEW STORY
Hotel beige	Homey feeling
Standardize culture	Soul of a city
Transactional	Relational
Monopoly pricing	Democratized pricing
Be restrained	Belong anywhere

OLD STORY	NEW STORY

Create a Character Study

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Define the key characters in your story.	What is their desire and what is their dilemma?
Pick the top 3-5. Who's the hero or protagonist?	How do they see themselves? How does the world see them?
From whose vantage point should you tell the story?	What assumptions can you test and validate about your character?
What do they want, what gets in the way?	What research could you do to get closer to your character?

Name:

Age:

Profession:

Matrix:

Desire:

Dilemma:

Inner Perceptions:

External Perceptions:

Step 1: Context for Change Tips and Tricks

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To succeed in your high-stakes presentation, you have to show your audience the context for change. Help them embrace the inevitability of the future that you're describing and the opportunities that come with being out in front of the change. Do this well, and your vision is undeniable. Here are four cautionary reminders as you put this storytelling strategy into practice.

Pick the right battles to fight.

Use your energy intelligently. It's rarely wise to open with something contentious, controversial, or debatable. Instead, present a compelling context for change that is a generally accepted truth. Focus on what everybody wants. What will create a natural momentum of yes? In the next chapter, I'll talk about how to humanize your big idea.

Focus on what's right instead of on what's wrong.

Why put people into a fight/flight/freeze (cortisol) state? You want the context for change to be aspirational, filled with an opportunity statement that is exciting. Otherwise, you risk your audience taking your message personally and interpreting that you are suggesting they are wrong, bad, or stupid. Putting your audience on the defensive is not a winning persuasive proposition.

Avoid the seven-layer burrito.

It may sound delicious, until you're about three bites in and your stomach starts to turn. Don't make your opening so complex that it gives your audience indigestion. Focus on a clear premise. What is the most dramatic and compelling way that the world is changing? Explain it in a way that makes what you're doing more obvious than ever before. It's ideally a single idea, with at most two or three supporting points.

Don't get ahead of the story.

Remember you live and breathe what you're working on. Which means you might already be in Chapter 9 of the story, when most of your audience is back in Chapter 2 or 3. Which is why you want to frame the context properly, and invite the audience to come along the journey with you. What might be blatantly obvious to you is what everyone most wants or needs to know. Take the time to slow down. Odds are people need to be reminded of the bigger picture, even if it seems rather self-evident to you.

Step 2: Emotional Dilemma Tips and Tricks

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Of course, there are many ways to go wrong as you develop your main character. Here are some tips that will help you stay on the right course.

Choose the right hero.

Make sure you're casting a hero that you have the ability to influence and impact with your product, service, or solution. Don't try to solve for something outside your direct sphere of control. That's a recipe for failure.

Describe your character in aspirational terms.

It's easy when doing a character study to let your frustrations with a character seep in. In other words, you may have a complicated relationship with this character (aka customer, user, member, etc.). Perhaps they haven't always embraced your company's role in wanting to serve and make a difference. Or maybe they are skeptical of your brand. Avoid the temptation to describe them in condescending or pejorative terms. Make it a love story! Even if they are difficult, what are their redeeming or endearing qualities? Don't make your characters wrong for wanting what they want.

Go beyond victims and villains.

If you truly want to move the world, you need a message that transcends what separates us. The more your narrative is built on adversarial, oppositional, or divisive framing, the more you will get stuck in the very story you are trying to transcend. It's a rhetorical trap and a self-fulfilling prophecy. Avoid it or pay the price of what is very likely unnecessary bloodshed and endless battle.

Avoid false resolution.

The blind spot of Empathy Mapping and typical advertising/marketing personas is the presentation of an over-rationalized diagnosis and solution. Unless you're selling toothpaste or diapers, your issue is complicated. Honor the paradox that your character faces, as it will make for a more real and interesting story. Also, if you solve the problem too early, where's the story going to go next? There is nowhere to go after "The End." So, try to avoid a premature conclusion.

Step 3: Evidence of Truth Tips and Tricks

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Truth is often in the eye of the beholder. It comes down to who is telling the story. Truth can be elusive and hard to pin down in black-and-white terms. There are often many shades of gray. Here are some tips to consider as you shape the evidence that will inform the truth at the heart of your *Undeniable Story*.

Still in startup.

What if you don't have enough data to prove your progress so far? Most innovators don't. You're doing something new and speculative. So, focus on other proof points, such as research that validates demand and unmet need. Or historical precedents and convergence of forces that legitimize the opportunity today.

Find a metaphor.

Comparables are a powerful way to show equivalence or comparison to an opportunity that has worked in other contexts. For example, "We're the Uber for recruiting"; "We're the WeWork for digital nomads"; "We're the Tinder for pets." (Yes, there is a Tinder for pets. In fact, several—Dog Date Afternoon and BarkBuddy to name just two.) Be careful, however, this strategy can become clichéd if it's overused.

Stories about social impact.

Tell a personal story about how one person's life has been changed, and then multiply it times the number of people served. You could say, for example, "This is the story of Elizabeth, and she is just one of the 3,000 lives that we transformed this past year." As neuroscientist Paul J. Zak reminds us, we need the personal human story to relate to before we can connect to the abstraction of a much bigger numbers.

Your narrative doesn't ring true.

Go back to Steps 1 (See It) and 2 (Feel It). When your narrative doesn't ring true, this speaks to a deeper fundamental misalignment and lack of relevance. Take a close look at how you've chosen to frame what you're doing and then rework it.

15 Sources of Evidence

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In principle, every legal case is won or lost based on the supporting evidence. If the evidence is significantly in your favor and tangible in some way (for example, a written contract signed by both parties), you're likely to win the case. If your evidence is weak—or doesn't exist at all—chances are you're going to lose. Of course, there are other factors that influence a judge's or jury's decision, some of which are addressed in our early storytelling strategies related to context and emotion. In much the same way, when telling your *Undeniable Story*, you need to present some kind of proof that shows your story is real and possible.

1 Performance metrics: This is the most obvious—financial data and behavioral measures. Often you don't yet have metrics to share when you're on the front-end of innovation. Use this evidence to demonstrate positive signal and momentum toward future outcomes.

2 Personal story: This is a device on the other end of the spectrum. Share the origin story behind your quest—or a personal story that happened to you or to a customer—that symbolizes the dream, desire, and dilemma. Use this evidence to demonstrate intent, purpose, and motivation.

3 User research: This includes quantitative and qualitative research. Designed to bring you closer into the lives of those you want to serve. What do they want, need, or care about? Use this evidence to humanize the characters at the center of your story.

4 Scientific proof: This includes research studies, patents, algorithms, and the like. Anything that anchors your story in the scientific rigor of evaluation. Use this evidence to validate your underlying premise, technology, or differentiated position.

5 Pilot projects: This comprises initial betas, proof of concepts, and minimum viable products. A short sprint that demonstrates viability of demand and functionality. Use this evidence as proof that your vision is real and possible, at a small scale.

6 Historical precedent: Here you're using past milestones, breakthroughs, and progress in your respective category. The more precedent something has, the more real we perceive it to be. Use this evidence to establish a track record and demonstrate prior impact with the topic at hand.

7 Product demos: Here you offer an interactive demonstration of how it works. Give people a taste of what could be possible, moving from the abstract to the tangible. Use this evidence to make your message concrete, allowing your audience to experience your promise firsthand.

8 Customers: This category includes names, titles, logos, and headshots. Ideally feature individuals and brands that your audience admires, respects, and recognizes. Use this evidence to reinforce trust, relatability, and relevance—what you offer has been validated by others like them.

9 Testimonials: This includes written and video format from your users/customers/subject-matter experts. This is a way of having "other people" tell the story and affirm the good in what you're up to. Use this evidence to introduce a wider range of voices that validate your vision.

10 Third-party endorsements: Including awards, earned media coverage, and recognition. You're trading on the reputational, celebrity, and trusted authority power of others. Use this evidence as a way to anchor the new into the familiar.

11 Case studies: This comprises stories and vignettes of past successes. Give your audience a way to envision the journey from initial need to ultimate outcome. Use this evidence to encourage your audience to identify with the journey as their own.

12 Explainer video: This is a short, one- to three-minute video. It illustrates what you do, who you serve, how it works, and why it matters. Use this evidence to demystify the complex.

13 Communities: This includes user forums, Facebook groups, email lists, and other social media channels. Anything that serves as a point of interaction where people can connect and express themselves on issues that matter. Use this evidence to demonstrate audience engagement and fandom.

14 Events and experiences: Including conferences, summits, and meetups. Designed to bring your ideas to life through face-to-face, real-world interaction. Use this evidence to demonstrate an active and engaged community with demonstrated shared interest and desire to build the future.

15 Thought leadership: This includes interviews, summits, books, white papers, and webinars. Create a content strategy that demonstrates depth of insight in a category. Use evidence to establish subject-matter expertise, authority, and commitment to your field.

Putting Your Story Into Practice

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1 Vision story > Aspiration
Beyond strategy or OKRs. Bring the strategy to life, with a vector for where the world is headed. How can you turn this future into a self-fulfilling prophecy?

2 Product story > Meaning
Beyond the roadmap or feature stack. Humanize your product or solution in people's lives. How can you align stakeholders and get everyone emotionally invested?

3 Customer story > Empathy
Beyond just personas. Clarify who your story is for and how to make it relatable to them. What do they want, what gets in their way, and how are lives changed thanks to you?

4 About story > Origins
Beyond just history. Present your reason for being, humble beginnings, and your contributions to the greater culture. Why are you for real and to be trusted?

5 Investor story > Opportunity
Beyond just the slide deck. Describe the disruptive change, the opportunity market, and your solution. Why are you the team to make something happen?

6 Brand story > Ethos
Beyond just a tagline. Bring to life the promise, purpose, and values of your organization. The manifesto. Give people something to believe in. What does it feel like to be a part of this tribe?

7 Marketing story > Campaign
Beyond just go to market. Focus on the change you seek to create. What changes in emotions, beliefs, or behavior do you seek to create? And what stories can you serialize to make that true?

8 Recruiting story > Talent
Beyond the ordinary on-boarding. Attract the right talent. How do you initiate them into the culture and how they can most meaningfully contribute?

9 Culture story > Belonging
Beyond a static mission and values statement. Put the brand and values into action. What are the stories that bring the ethos and message to life? What are the rituals of belonging?

10 Thought Leadership story > Ideas
Beyond a positioning statement. Share a unique point of view or expertise in your industry. How can you demonstrate your commitment to the future of your category?

3 Steps to an *Undeniable Story*

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1 See It: Context for Change

Present the future in aspirational terms—how change leads to opportunity

Set the scene. Give your audience a durable context. Zoom out – what's the big, relevant change? Capture the imagination. Get people stirred up, in a good way.

- What world does this story describe?
- What's the big change or shift underway?
- How does this change equal possibility?
- What can we do now, but not before?
- What are the hard unanswered questions?

2 Feel It: Emotional Dilemma

Build empathy, describing the gap between desire and dilemma

Choose a character. Put them at the center. Zoom in - what do they want, what gets in their way? Name the creative tension and dilemma. Be specific, detailed, nuanced.

- Who's at the center of the story?
- What do they want? Desires?
- What gets in their way? Obstacles?
- What's their biggest dilemmas?
- How is this character relatable?

3 Believe It: Evidence of Truth

Provide supporting data that legitimizes the promise of your big idea

Present data and proof. Validate the big promise. Why trust and believe you? Cases are won and lost on the supporting evidence. Overcome reasonable doubt.

- What's your right to tell us this story?
- How do we know this is for real?
- How do we know this is possible?
- What have you achieved so far?
- What is your credibility and proof?