

Story Telling

The Secret Ingredient of
Firm Culture

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“Once upon a time...”

Who isn't excited about the potential for a good story after we hear those words? I remember the attentiveness we gave to our parents when they began to tell us a story, even if we heard the story a hundred times. People are natural story tellers. It started in our early evolution before we had a written language. It was a survival skill! Stories hold compelling imagery, teach us lessons, and they tell us about our history, about our culture and what we value as a family, a nation, and in our organizations today.

A healthy company culture brims with demonstrations of creative leadership, innovation, and initiative. These actions will generate stories which are compelling because they are the true basis of a story or a narrative which define culture and have the potential to shift culture. The best stories are about what people actually do and how they demonstrate their values through their actions.

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For example, if a firm says it is committed to the community how do they demonstrate their pro bono commitment and community work. There is a story embedded in that. Let's say the firm states they have great work /life flexibility. How are they actually demonstrating that in real time among the people at the firm? There are undoubtedly examples of what work/life flexibility has actually meant to someone there which is the basis of writing a story about it. How does the firm demonstrate its commitment to continuing education when its marketing material states that they are on the cutting edge of new approaches to sustainability? That's a story! If the firm states that they are committed to developing its next generation of leaders what is actually being done to engage and preparing their future leaders.

All of these examples offer opportunities for true stories to be told and re-told. These stories create a tapestry of the cultural dimension of a company which is profound and real to both the people in the organization. A marketing department can effectively build on these stories but they cannot create the real values, behaviors, and demonstrations of the underlying themes.

In our work at Greenway, we help client's firms strengthen their market position and polish their market's perception of their firm. One of the first things we do is ask their teams about the stories they tell about their firm to people outside of the firm. They may think the story is just about their project work and they have no other real stories. They do and we work to uncover them. They always exist and the teams tell them and repeat them. What are they? They are extremely valuable assets. Think about what you do as your stories and that they are part of your business 'toolbox' in the same way you think about the talent,

effective business processes, technology, and your physical infrastructure you have. The stories you tell internally and externally define your history, who you are now, your culture, and what the firm values. They become the underlying structural authenticity of your brand. Without them, the brand is hollow.

Stories can be a powerful cultural tool. Your current staff tells stories about what the firm actually does now or did in its history. Some of the stories we hear which add a valuable dimension to a firm have been about interesting facets of the founding of the firm and what they did to start it all. Firms have engaging stories of project wins against the odds and about how colleagues help one another in kind and above and beyond thoughtful ways. They talk about what the design culture is at their firm and what they actually do to demonstrate that culture beyond the day to day work on client's projects. They may hold design round table discussions they every first Friday and present ideas to one another. They talk to new staff, they talk to their peers at other firms. Stories gain momentum. The marketing people talk to press people and share the stories about the pro bono project focus or crowd sourcing funds to start an innovative new app with a team of associates. The stories are oft repeated and have the potential to become almost mythical. Which stories exemplify the qualities which capture your culture of caring, going the extra mile, and how the firm creates a culture of design?

A good example of story-telling which expresses an authentic cultural dimension of a company is from working with Knoll. They have many great mythic stories which ultimately illustrate their values as a design driven company. Knoll values experimentation and research in design methods and materials in the process of new product development. For a company that manufactures furniture what could be more important? I can't end this article without a story which illustrates the Knoll design culture. The story lives on after over 60 years which only illustrates the value. Briefly,

Once upon a time Hans and Florence Knoll invited Harry Bertoia, artist/sculptor and friend, to come and set up his studio to experiment with new materials and sculpture forms. The Knolls built him a studio/barn in the country near their factory in Pennsylvania. He had access to a great space, tools, and machinery and factory resources. He tested many methods and ended up creating a technique with molded wires that led to the creation of a sculpture. In order to produce this "sculpture" he had to design new machinery to push existing factory capabilities. He created it and then he put the sculpture into a support stand. Now it is a chair, the Bertoia chair to be precise. In the creative process, art combined with industry and this sculptural form was able to be reproduced over and over thousands of times to renowned results. This is a story which illustrates how Knoll demonstrated its process: a design challenge, a designer is invited to help solve it (they don't all get a studio/barn though), then they experiment, stretch the limits of current production capability to accommodate a new method or material, and voila! Innovation!

I heard the Bertoia story 20 years ago, it is still memorable, and it underpins the real design legacy of Knoll's brand. The power of this true story is accrued to its culture. It is one of many legacy stories

carried on by the company's associates. The culture supports their brand, has contributed to the company's financial stability, and demonstrates design leadership which are desired business outcomes.

Firms have their own stories. Newly minted designers want to be a part of the cultures of these firms because they have heard the stories about them. Clients want to connect to these firms because they know about the firm through the stories they have heard and believe they share values with them. What are the stories people have to tell about your company? Listen carefully. These stories create value and can transform firm culture.

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