

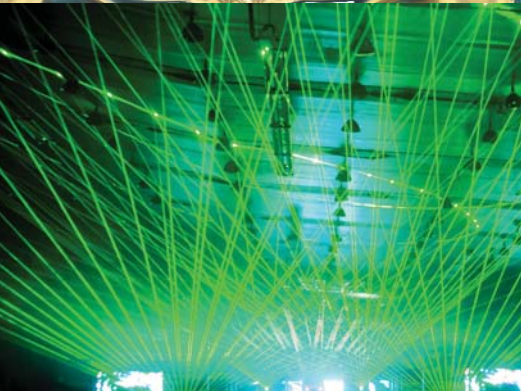
A close-up photograph of a green apple and a slice of orange. The apple is on the left, and the orange slice is on the right, partially overlapping the apple. The background is a light, neutral color.

# THE STORY OF STORIES

Strategic Storytelling.  
The Purpose and the Process.

Let's begin by defining what we mean by "story". A story is a detailed, highly strategic portrayal of how your organization will be experienced by everyone who comes in contact with it at an agreed-upon point in the future, typically one to five years hence. The story also clearly describes the steps you must take to become that organization. The story assumes you have decided that, to succeed in a New Economy enabled by the Internet, your enterprise model must change. Apples become oranges.

John Updike famously said, "I always listen to storytelling possibilities. Every novel I've written has begun with a "What if..."



The concept of strategic storytelling evolved out of our work in the 1980's and 1990's with museums, science centers, cultural centers, educational attractions and several World's Fairs. These were not-for-profit organizations and their boards-of-directors had a significant say in decision-making. Because the boards were large, often 15 to 25 people or more, and the directors had such diverse backgrounds and varied levels of experience, it was almost always a challenge to get them to agree on what story they wanted us to tell. It occurred to us that the simple solution was to get all of the board members into one room at one time and encourage them to write their own story, with direction from us. From the very first project on, the approach proved to be successful, in retrospect for three reasons:



**We had the good sense to bring a qualified facilitator to each session to help us guide the participants through the process**



**As writers ourselves, responsible for doing much of our own story research, we knew what questions to ask and when to ask them. We understood the principles of open-ended questioning that inspires discussion, provides insights and sparks innovation. We knew how to get into the hearts, as well as the minds, of participants**



**By slowly and thoughtfully narrowing the focus of the story, by the end of each session we were able to achieve both clarity and consensus. The participants recognized the story as being their own and took pride in their individual contributions, which they saw reflected in the completed story. They became advocates and disciples of the story**

We called the process "envisioning", a term that, at the time, did not yet exist in dictionaries. Since then, similar processes have become almost ubiquitous, although our clients would say that ours remains unique in its ability to engage people at a pragmatic yet passionate level. And the approach has worked equally as well for businesses because companies, like not-for-profits, also have very eclectic leadership teams comprised of left and right brain thinkers, administrators and marketers, optimists and contrarians, and those who welcome change and those who oppose it - all of whom must be drawn into the process. Entrepreneurial organizations are filled with smart, successful people, but reliance on the same skills that made them successful can also make them resistant to learning new things and embracing change. As behavioral psychologist Abraham Maslow noted, "when all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail." Therefore, one of the challenges facing every organization is to open closed minds.

Over the past 25 years, we have staged 200-plus envisionings for enterprises of all sizes, from startups to multinationals, and all types including destination resorts, the hospitality sector, the travel industry and even financial services providers. Clients have used our process to develop projects, products and services - to build brand loyalty, increase demand and create value. As clients continued to find new applications for the process, we have continued to refine it. Today, there are three distinct stages to our process - envisioning, storytelling and becoming. Envisioning is a reference to the authoring of the story. Storytelling, of course, is the dissemination of the story. And becoming is the enactment of the story, translating vision into reality. Put another way; envisioning is permission to transform, storytelling is permission to believe, and becoming is permission to change.

One of the best explanations of the power of story I have come across is this quote by Annette Simmons from her book *The Story Factor*.

"People don't want more information. They are up to their eyeballs in information. They want faith - faith in you, your goals, your success, in the story you tell. It is faith that moves mountains, not facts. Story is your path to creating faith. Telling a meaningful story means inspiring your listeners - coworkers, leaders, subordinates, family or a bunch of strangers - to reach the same conclusions you have reached and decide for themselves to believe what you say and do what you want them to do. People value their own conclusions more highly than yours. They will only have faith in a story that has become real for them personally. Once people make your story their story, you have tapped into the powerful force of faith. Future influence will require very little energy from you and may even expand as people recall and retell your story to others."

# transform

## ENVISIONING

Envisioning is a facilitated process that engages a group of either 15 or 21 people to collectively author a "future story" of a product, a service or an entire organization and precisely how customers, associates, shareholders, the media and employees will experience that entity. Envisioning is both a powerful imagineering and strategic planning tool that businesses like Nike, FedEx, Johnson & Johnson, GE, Relais & Chateaux and others are using to redefine, reinvent and reenergize themselves by recognizing the need for innovation. At one time, all a company had to do was gradually improve – to do the same thing but to do it somewhat differently.. Today, in the face of the information explosion, a global economy and intense competition from around the world, organizations must do something completely different. The distinction between differently and different is profound. A friend compared it to, "...in 1909 choosing to build a better horse-drawn buggy rather than applying many of the same skills to begin manufacturing automobiles."

The actual envisioning session is two days long. Day one is spent in information gathering (discovery) and the second day in authoring. Envisioning busts participants out of their intellectual bunkers and frees them of the assumptions and the accumulated years of knowledge and experience that have actually been limiting their ability to innovate. It is a shared exercise, one involving all of the company's leaders because, as author and organizational guru Margaret Wheatley explains, "people only support what they create."

The methodically crafted, 20 to 25-page written story that emerges from each of our envisionings helps guide all decision-making. It is a roadmap into the future. It tells how to attract investors, build relationships, inspire employees and captivate customers. An organizational story is a powerful device in management of meaning and emotion and the diffusion of knowledge.

# believe

## STORYTELLING

Having an engaging story and leaders with the ability to skillfully articulate it is critical to every phase of enterprise management. A story (we refer to it as a Storyline) is used to move an organization, a project, product or service towards an agreed-upon goal. Our clients use their Storylines to brief their advertising agencies, PR firms, website builders and the media. Not surprisingly, many of our clients use their Storylines as groundwork for strategic planning sessions. We also have investor clients who use envisioning and storytelling as part of their due diligence process - to determine whether there is hidden value in a potential acquisition.

A Storyline typically contain a description of a company's origins, where it must go and what steps it must take to get there. There is a section dedicated to Cornerstones (the company's abiding values), and another to Extraordinarys, the tangible features that will distinguish the enterprise from its would-be competitors. In today's economy, Storylines may also speak to the short-term sacrifices necessary to achieve long-term success, as well as how best to apply precious resources, including time, manpower and money, in pursuit of the mission.

There's a difference between a business plan and a story. Although both use words, the business plan is limited to imparting information. The story does that too, but it also reaches into the readers' souls and inspires them to do things they never thought possible. See [storysmithing.com](http://storysmithing.com) for the various techniques and technologies we recommend that clients use to launch their stories. Some are high-tech and all are high-touch.



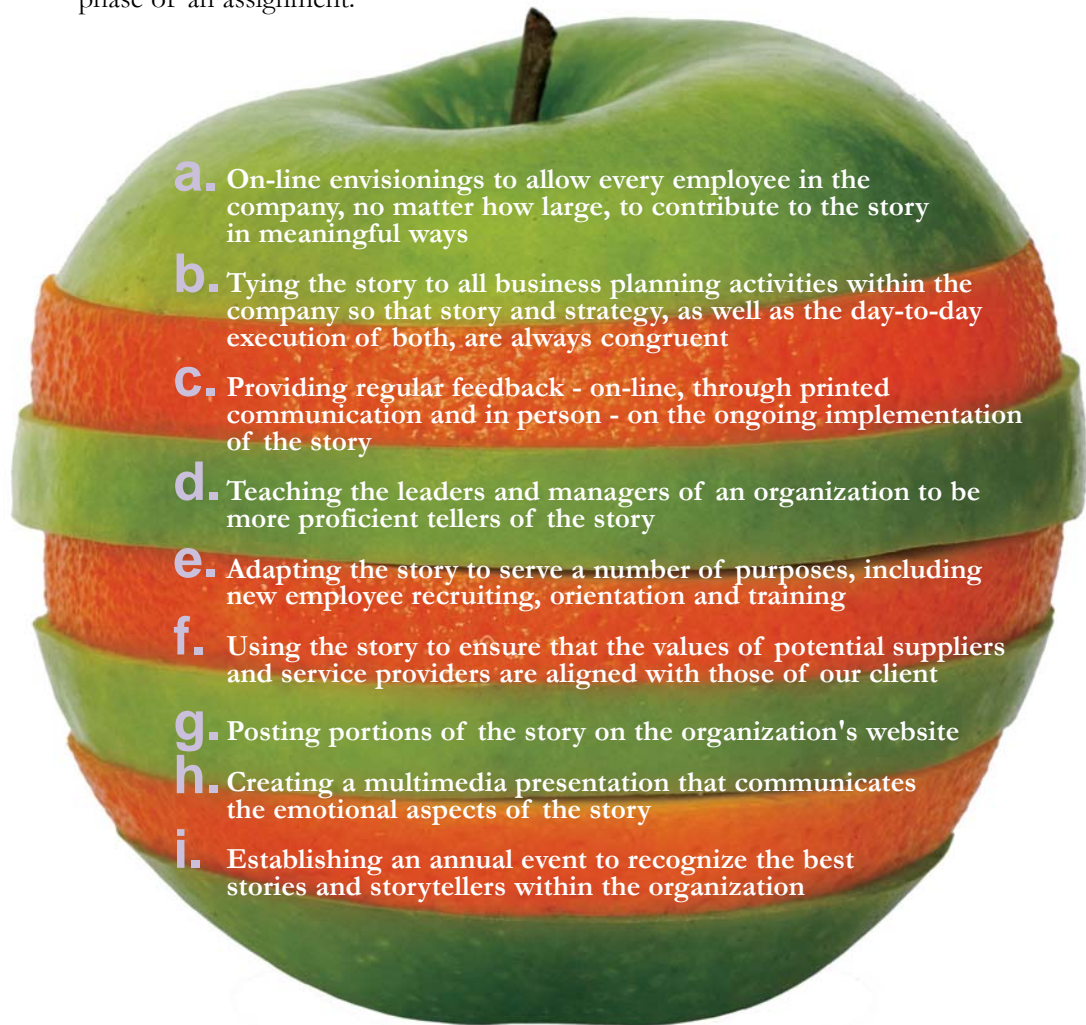
# change

## BECOMING

Early on, we recognized that the economic value of a story resides as much or more in its implementation as it does in clever articulation. Becoming the story is a reference to its implementation - turning vision into reality and moving from the present into the future. Stories can inspire and even catalyze change, but change itself can only occur by taking concrete action.

An outsider, a consultant, can recommend that changes should occur, but enduring change can only come from within an organization. So becoming focuses on indentifying leaders, managers and key employees within the organization who are committed to the story and to bringing it to life. These are the people who will ensure that the story not only spreads throughout the organization but also firmly takes hold.

These are some of the many tools and techniques we have used in the becoming phase of an assignment:



- a. On-line envisionings to allow every employee in the company, no matter how large, to contribute to the story in meaningful ways
- b. Tying the story to all business planning activities within the company so that story and strategy, as well as the day-to-day execution of both, are always congruent
- c. Providing regular feedback - on-line, through printed communication and in person - on the ongoing implementation of the story
- d. Teaching the leaders and managers of an organization to be more proficient tellers of the story
- e. Adapting the story to serve a number of purposes, including new employee recruiting, orientation and training
- f. Using the story to ensure that the values of potential suppliers and service providers are aligned with those of our client
- g. Posting portions of the story on the organization's website
- h. Creating a multimedia presentation that communicates the emotional aspects of the story
- i. Establishing an annual event to recognize the best stories and storytellers within the organization

## IN CLOSING

What we do is help our clients create a story authentic to them, give it form, make it compelling, and then assist them in telling that story in ways that cut through the massive amount of information and misinformation people now have to process every waking moment of their lives. A story allows an organization to always be clear about what it is, defines what it wants to be, and captures the imagination of audiences that are important to its future. When it's done right, buzz follows. Perceptions change. Performance is ignited. People unite. Progress accelerates.

Paul Smith is a writer, director, multimedia producer and the founder of Vancouver-based Envisioning + Storytelling. Today he works with a small number of companies who value the importance of story. [paul@storysmithing.com](mailto:paul@storysmithing.com)

"STORIES  
GIVE  
ENTERPRISE  
MEANING."

