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Once Upon a Time

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All of us love stories. And all of us tell stories, although some do it better than others. President Obama is by anyone's tally a fine communicator. Yet his quest for a middle-of-the-road approach to healthcare reform faltered until he began to tell the story of his grandmother's last days, rather than lecture to recalcitrant crowds. A recent posting on the RainToday Web site advised a reputationally-challenged company unable to keep staff from defecting to change the quality of the stories it told about itself. Once these stories became more positive and progressive, it declared, the internal and external attitudes toward the company would change.

One of the best business narrators is trainer/author Stephen Denning. In *The Leader's Guide to Storytelling*, he writes, "I could see that storytelling was more than one tool: It was at least a whole array of tools—tools that could help achieve multiple purposes such as sparking people into action, communicating who you are or who your company is, transmitting values, sharing knowledge, taming the grapevine, and leading into the future."

Like Denning, I often use stories in business. Many pepper *Communication by Design*, my collection of insights and anecdotes into what makes professional services firms thrive. For *Marketer* this issue, I'm providing some of the stories I use while consulting, training, or speaking publicly. Enjoy and pass them on, with your own set-up and take-away.

The first story is often used as an insight into just how much marketing is enough.

Two men encounter a bear in the forest. One of the men pulls his running shoes out of his knapsack and puts them on. The other man, already running fast, calls back, incredulously, "You don't think those running shoes are going to help you outrun that bear!" The other man replies, "I don't have to outrun the bear. I only have to outrun you!"

Here is a short anecdote on the theme of legacy, a favorite of President John F. Kennedy.

The great French Marshal Hubert Lyautey [1854–1934] once asked his gardener to plant a tree. The gardener objected that the tree was slow-growing and would not reach maturity for 100 years. The marshal replied: "In that case, there is no time to lose! Plant it this afternoon!"

Here's a brief cautionary tale drawn from the great Walt Kelly's cartoon strip about the creatures of the Okefenokee Swamp. Pogo, a possum, is the hero.

Pogo was standing on the sidewalk watching all of his animal friends ride past on a fire truck. The siren was wailing and the lights were flashing. In alarm, Pogo cried out, "The fire is in the other direction!" "Yes," came the reply, "but we're making record time!"

A trenchant anecdote about the importance of preparation came to me recently, courtesy of architect Rick Cook.

A passerby observed a woodsman who was taking forever to fell a tree. The problem was obvious. He shouted to the woodsman, "Why don't you sharpen your ax? It will take much less time and effort." The woodsman responded: "I don't have time to sharpen my ax. I have to chop down this tree!"

Perhaps because I majored in languages and daily struggle to learn the vocabulary of the industry's new technologies, this is an anecdote I use often.

A mother cat took her kittens out for their first stroll around town. Turning a corner, they were suddenly confronted by an extremely large and exceedingly menacing bulldog. Undaunted, Mom walked straight up to the dog, looked him right in the eye, and barked loudly. The bulldog, confused, backed off and slunk away. "That, my children," said the mother cat to her little ones, "demonstrates the importance of being to communicate in a foreign language."

