

Letting Them In: Sharing Your Story with People outside of Your Industry¹

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This publication covers how to share your story. It is the second of a four-part series on crafting your story, including *Story Development* (AEC553), *Face-to-face Storytelling* (AEC555), and *Storytelling through Social Media* (AEC556). This series will focus on both personal and organization stories.



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Introduction

Once you have created your organization's story and you understand what the story is, the next step is sharing it with others. However, it can be tricky to know how to present your organization's story to a given audience. It is usually easy to share a story with people from your own community or industry because you all share an understanding of basic concepts, values, and processes. When you step out of that shared understanding, it can be more difficult

to convey ideas, but to be able to effectively describe what you do to others, you will have to bridge that gap of understanding. Storytelling can be used as a tool to provide that understanding to different audiences.

The purpose of this publication is to demonstrate ways to craft your story for your audience. As mentioned in *Story Development* (AEC553), sharing the story of your organization can improve customer relations, community engagement, and market share. It is important to craft your organization's story to be able to share it effectively. If you can invoke emotion from your story within your audience, audience members will connect to your message and product.

Crafting Your Story to Fit Your Audience

The same story can be crafted in different ways. Once you have created your story (see *Story Development* (AEC553)), you can emphasize different elements of the story to fit your intended audience. Different groups have different interests, and it is your responsibility to learn what those interests are so that you can shape your story to demonstrate how your work relates to those interests (you can learn more about how to do this in *Extension Marketing: Campaign Planning and Audience Analysis* (AEC397)). Ideally, you would learn your audience's interests by asking people with whom you are sharing your story what they are interested in. Keeping

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in mind that people cannot remember every detail of a story, focus on what core concept you want your audience to walk away with. Choose one thing that you want people to associate with your story that relates to their interests. Once you have done this, point every detail that emphasizes this concept.

As an example, we will look at a farming operation that has not targeted its story to its audience. We will examine Jerry's Berries. The facts of his operation are as follows:

"Jerry's Berries is a small family-owned and -operated farming operation that grows a variety of berry crops, including strawberries, blueberries, and blackberries. The family that runs Jerry's Berries wants to keep their crops primarily within the local community. Their primary competition is with larger farming operations in the state. Jerry's Berries has found that by selling much of the produce to local distributors, they can still compete in the marketplace. During the appropriate seasons, the farm is opened up to the community to pick berries. Jerry's Berries has been successful in achieving its goals through these methods."

You can see that this story has all of the elements that make a story: a protagonist (lead character), a goal (what the protagonist is trying to achieve), and an obstacle that the protagonist overcame (the problem keeping the protagonist from achieving his goal) (see *Story Development* (AEC553)). However, the story is presented in a way that does not emphasize an audience's interests. In this case, the audience is the local community members who come to pick berries. After talking with his audience, the Jerry of Jerry's Berries finds that his audience finds community to be important. The story has been reframed below with an emphasis on community:

"Jerry's Berries is a family-owned and -operated farming operation that grows a variety of berry crops, including strawberries, blueberries, and blackberries. This family-run business shares a passion for improving and providing excellent produce within their local community. Though their primary competition is with larger farming operations in the state, Jerry's Berries has found that by selling much of their produce to local distributors, they can still compete in the marketplace. To ensure that people in the community have a chance to know their farmer and where their food comes from, during the appropriate seasons, locals are invited to the farm to pick berries and learn more about the farm. Jerry's Berries has been successful in achieving its goals through these methods."

In this revised story, the ideas of community and learning about local food were stressed, thus connecting the organization's story with the audience of local consumers.

Simplicity

When you and your audience do not have a similar background, keeping your organization's story simple, yet appealing, is ideal. Effective storytelling utilizes words and imagery that your audience understands. Here are three recommendations as you develop your organization's story.

Do Not Use Jargon

Your audience may not have an understanding or may have the wrong understanding of certain technical concepts. Though some words may be common within your industry, they may not be easily understood in other contexts. Words may have different definitions or be simply unknown. "Organic" and "GMOs" (genetically modified organisms) are examples of jargon or unfamiliar words that may not be understood by your audience. In some cases, it is best to explain these concepts in different terms, such as describing what organic means or using another descriptor for GMOs. In cases when you cannot provide clear definitions, stay away from language that can confuse because audience members can only follow your story if they understand it.

Minimize Statistics

It can be tempting to load a story with figures that paint you or your operation in a positive light, but people do not remember numbers. It can be beneficial to leave a percentage or a number that demonstrates growth, but you will want to primarily tell your story using personal experiences as examples. For example, here is a story told primarily through statistics:

"In 1997, a freeze killed 60% of Jerry's Berries' crops, leading to a drop in revenue of 40% for the overall year, but the operation was able to return to profitability the next year with a growth of 10%."

Here is the same story told without the statistics:

"In 1997, the worst freeze seen in the state decimated Jerry's Berries' crops. It hurt the operation badly, and the company struggled that year. Through a concerted effort and a lot of hard work, the operation bounced back the next year, leading to growth."

Understand What Your Audience Finds Important

One way to do this would be to simply ask your audience what their interests are. (Again, refer to *Extension Marketing: Campaign Planning and Audience Analysis* ([AEC397](#)) for tips on conducting an audience analysis.) What do they care about? How do they choose what they purchase? When you know what your audience is interested in, tailor your story to those interests while remaining truthful. It helps you determine which concept to shape your story around.

For example, the Jerry's Berries story described earlier had an audience that identified community as an interest, so the operation told this story:

“To ensure that people in community have a chance to know their farmer and where their food comes from, during the appropriate seasons, locals are invited to the farm to pick berries and learn more about the farm.”

Had the audience been identified as caring strongly about the environment, the story would benefit from a sentence like this:

“As a family-owned farming operation, Jerry's Berries believes strongly in protecting our planet for future generations and takes every precaution to not harm the environment.”

Summary

When you understand what audience members value, you can shape your organization's story to include details and examples that will keep their attention. Through sharing that simple, yet compelling, message with your audience, you will achieve audience engagement, your organization's story will be more memorable, and your audience will share your story with others.