Executive Essentials: Master Storytelling to Become More Persuasive and Increase Engagement

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CIO’s need their communications to be understandable, insightful and convincing. When structured using common storytelling techniques, information becomes more interesting, more persuasive, and more memorable, and, therefore, more impactful.

Analysis

Up until the 1980s, storytelling wasn’t popular or trendy. ¹ TED Talks were not yet available and public speaking was not considered a career-defining skill. However, as attention spans shrink ² and audience expectations increase, CIOs search for ways to distill complex technical ideas into persuasive pitches and presentations. CIOs need to convey benefits, problems, solutions and a call to action, all while being engaging and, most importantly, interesting.

This document is part of a research collection covering four CIO focus areas comprising 20 accountabilities (see Note 1).

Storytelling Is More Than Clear Communication, It Is Clear Thinking

Storytelling not only helps CIOs communicate their ideas better, but it can also help formulate them. Success in digital business requires an updated approach to strategy and a higher demand for strategic thinking. Strategic thinking at its best, encourages unique perspectives and approaches to reach unexpected and unique solutions. One approach is to envision possible and desirable outcomes; expose related opportunities, risks and obstacles; and devise solutions and a plan to achieve success. As Figure 1 illustrates, strategic thinking and storytelling have a lot in common.
Stories are often described as occurring over three acts. In Act 1, the reader is introduced to a hero or protagonist. This is typically an empathetic character who the reader can relate with. In strategic thinking, Act 1 is where the art of the possible is envisioned. In Act 2, the hero attempts to overcome obstacles that have been set along their personal journey. In strategic thinking, Act 2 is where risks and obstacles (and opportunities) are exposed and considered. Finally, in Act 3, the hero of the story finds a resolution to their problem. They don’t always get what they want, but they usually get what they need. In Act 3 of strategic thinking, those solutions are explored and considered. The reason that this comparison between storytelling and strategic thinking is so important to communication is that many people communicate out of order. They will often start in Act 3 and begin describing a great solution while the audience is unclear as to what problem is being solved and for whom.

The act of structuring the story encourages a strategic consideration of the problem(s) to be solved and for whom they are being solved. A clear point of view and relatable and relevant stakes emerge leading to a well-crafted story and more persuasive communication.

Figure 1 represents a basic three-act story structure, highlighting its usefulness in persuasive communication and as an act of strategic thinking.

**Figure 1. Storytelling Alignment With Strategic Thinking**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategic Thinking</th>
<th>Storytelling</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Act 1: Envision the possible.</td>
<td>Introduce hero, their goals and desires, and the world they live in. Problems arise.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Act 2: Expose risks and obstacles.</td>
<td>The hero attempts to address the problems and overcome obstacles.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Act 3: Explore success solutions.</td>
<td>The hero’s problems are resolved.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CIOs Must Embrace Their Inner Storyteller
Superior communication skills are essential for a successful leadership career, yet many people are willing to ad lib or get by with a “good enough” presentation. Despite demand for what CIOs are talking about and selling (e.g., digital transformation), not everyone is listening. Be assured that during your next meeting, presentation or status update, people will be “multitasking” and staring into their electronic device of choice. Lacking effective storytelling, they won’t be paying attention to you. The technological advancements that you promote just might be your biggest competitor for everyone’s attention.

Storytelling CIOs engage an audience with more than a problem statement or cost-benefit analysis. They craft a compelling story by knowing their audience and what drives and motivates them. As an example, if they want to communicate a digital strategy, they decide if it is intended for the top executive team, the IT team, the digital program team, customers or citizens, or all of the above. If they want to put themselves forward as a candidate for a higher position or increased responsibility, such as an open board position, they construct a story for the CEO and the chairman. If their aim is to inspire the adoption of a new work culture, then they speak directly to the hearts and minds of their team. Once they understand who they are crafting their story for, they identify what that audience finds interesting, important, relevant and relatable. They create a conversation with space for dialogue and questions, whether it be in a boardroom or over a webcam.

A storytelling CIO invests in taking an empathetic view of their audience to ensure that their focus is on creating understanding and not just “communicating” through slides and bullet lists. Data and facts are important, but not especially persuasive alone. It’s important to be right, but more persuasive to be interesting. When using slides, ensure that they complement your message, not compete with it.

Therefore, practice more than you think you should. Begin rehearsing under comfortable, low-pressure situations. Get comfortable with your content, and practice tempo, intonation and body language. Use this time to experiment with different visual mediums. As you get comfortable, increase the pressure and move from practicing in front of a mirror to friends and family, then on to trusted colleagues, until you are ready for the final delivery.
CIOs Must Know How to Tell Stories to Sell Their Ideas and Get Investment

Storytelling CIOs know how to pitch and sell their ideas, their teams and themselves by using stories and storytelling elements. They can turn a business case from standard business-speak, stale generic language and vague outcomes into succinct and crisp messages that help their audience and possible “investors,” (e.g., key stakeholders and budget holders) understand and feel the opportunity.

To pitch an idea is to sell that idea, yet selling can feel unseemly to many CIOs. To avoid being “salesy,” CIOs need to tell the story. Using their unique insider perspective, their understanding of technology, the industry and the business, and their teams, the storytelling CIO perfectly crafts a message that is suited to their audience. Doing so requires gathering intelligence, influencing influencers, surfacing advocates and advisors, and synthesizing findings into relevant stories. Investors want to be assured they have made the right investment — not that they have been “sold to.”

Storytelling CIOs know how to tell stories that unlock common barriers to investment. People are often resistant to things they don’t understand, that are complex or novel or for which they don’t have an easy point of reference. If they cannot relate, skepticism can lead to indecision, which in turn, results in inaction. Therefore, it is important to create a sense of familiarity and a clear frame of reference to overcome objections before they solidify. To quote the noted psychologist and economist, Daniel Kahneman, “No one ever made a decision because of a number. They need a story.”

Before pitching ideas in a high-stakes environment, storytelling CIOs know that good pitches require practice and testing, so they create pilots and prototypes to practice and refine them in low-risk environments.

Delivering Great Communications Requires an Effective Communications Core

Great communication inspires action and commitment and drives better business outcomes. To deliver great IT communication and great stories, CIOs must build an effective communications core around stakeholder management and messaging that considers the context of each communication.

A Willis Towers Watson ROI study on effective communications found a correlation between communications effectiveness, organizational turnover and financial performance.
The communications core consists of a communications strategy, a comprehensive plan and delivery skills. At the heart of the communications strategy is the vision for linking IT to the business and driving business outcomes. A core set of common IT communications often includes:

- Strategy, strategic plans and execution status
- Performance and technology’s impact to the enterprise
- Policies
- IT updates

CIOs should strive for excellence in building, regularly delivering and continually improving a plan for each of these core communications. Delivering clear and consistent messages helps create an “organizational memory” around what is important, what people need to do and what success looks like.

Building excellence around these core forms of communication contributes to a strong operational core and improves IT’s credibility. An IT organization with a strong operational core earns the right to participate at additional levels within the enterprise.

Executive Summary Video

Next Steps for CIOs
As CIOs, you should:
1. Embrace the role of storyteller for better communications and better strategic thinking. (See Selling Digital Transformation: A CIO's Guide to Crafting Better Stories.)

2. Increase the clarity and actionability of your presentations by adapting your communication style to your audience, create compelling presentation content and rehearse delivery. (See A CIO’s Guide to Better Storytelling and Presentations and Ignition Guide to Delivering Compelling Presentations.)

3. Maximize the impact of your communications with board members and top-level executives by adopting a set of practical rules for presenting proposals and status reports, and creating digital discussions. (See A Practical Approach to Presenting to the Board of Directors for CIOs.)

4. Communicate the business value of IT to executive leadership by crafting technology’s value message and the supporting metrics as a narrative that tells how IT has impacted critical business outcomes. (See Tell an IT Value Story That Matters to Business Leadership.)

5. Turn a good idea into a great pitch and win leadership support by designing presentations that can distill complex technical ideas into short, persuasive sound bites that quickly convey benefits, problems, solutions and a call to action. (See How to Create a Persuasive Pitch That Attracts Interest and Investment and Making an Effective Pitch: The Development Process.)

6. Accelerate culture change by using a From/To/Because story to describe how you want your team members to behave to accelerate business efforts. (See Accelerate Culture Change Using the From/To/Because Model.)

7. Tell visual stories, too. (See The Art of Creating a One-Page Strategy.)

8. Use value stories to demonstrate digital value and to track organizational progress in support of your digital business objectives. (See Infographic: Value Stories to Tell About Your Digital Initiatives.)

Evidence

1 Google Ngram shows a dramatic increase in the use of “storytelling” after 1980.
Human Attention Span Shortens to 8 Seconds Due to Digital Technology: 3 Ways to Stay Focused, Medical Daily.


**Note 1: Gartner Essential Frameworks**

Gartner Essential Frameworks Executive Programs report outlines four CIO focus areas comprising 20 accountabilities. This Executive Essentials report focuses on the stakeholder engagement and communications accountability.

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**Recommended by the Author**

Some documents may not be available as part of your current Gartner subscription.

Your ‘Business Value of IT’ Narrative in the Ongoing COVID-19 Crisis

Effective Communications: How to Develop a Communications Strategy

Effective Communications: How to Perform a Stakeholder Analysis

Effective Communications: How to Develop a Communications Plan

Ignition Guide to Building a Compelling Digital Business Narrative to Accelerate Business Transformation