



Narrative, character, drama—Peter
how to get your attention. By Matthew Budman

what's the
story

Guber knows



As a movie producer, Peter Guber is responsible for bringing to life dozens of our best-loved stories, from *Rain Man* and *The Color Purple* to *Terminator 2* and *Groundhog Day*. Guber, 69, is a towering figure in the entertainment world, with a résumé that encompasses many of the most popular films and TV shows of the last thirty years: studio chief at Columbia Pictures; co-founder of Casablanca Record and Filmworks; chairman and CEO of PolyGram Entertainment; chairman and CEO of Sony Pictures Entertainment; and finally founder, chairman, and CEO of Mandalay Entertainment.



PHOTO BY DAVID CARLSON

And as he puts it, for the first thirty-seven years of his career, he didn't understand what he was doing—in pitch meetings, presentations, speeches, and conversations—that worked. "It took me thirty-seven years to figure out what I was," he says. "And I realized: Oh my God—I'm a storyteller! I didn't recognize it in myself."

The result of his *aha!* moment is *Tell to Win: Connect, Persuade, and Triumph with the Hidden Power of Story* (Crown Business), a book that marshals a sparkling array of anecdotes to argue that the secret of winning in business and life is narrative storytelling. On the phone, Guber makes the argument even more forcefully, at full volume and in torrents of words that build to a crescendo of enthusiasm. It's a pulse-quickenning thrill ride. Two thumbs up.

I THOUGHT IT'D BE APPROPRIATE TO BEGIN WITH A STORY. WHEN I WAS 10 OR 11, MY FAVORITE ALBUM WAS *LOVE GUN*, BY KISS, ON CASABLANCA RECORDS, OF WHICH YOU WERE CO-CHAIRMAN. AND ONE HALLOWEEN, A FRIEND AND I DRESSED UP AS ACE FREHLEY AND PETER CRISS, WITH TINFOIL OUTFITS AND FULL MAKEUP.

Scary!

NOW, I KNOW YOU WEREN'T THE ONE WHO SIGNED KISS, AND YOU DIDN'T FOCUS ON THE MUSIC SIDE OF CASABLANCA, BUT—

All the soundtracks were mine. We won the Oscar for the score for *Midnight Express* and best song for *Thank God It's Friday*; we did the music for the '84 Olympics.

I COULDN'T HELP NOTICING THAT YOU DIDN'T PUT MANY CASABLANCA ANECDOTES IN THE BOOK. I WAS HOPING FOR STORIES ABOUT *FLASH-DANCE* AND THE VILLAGE PEOPLE.

The Village People! My God. That was the perfect casting idea: You don't like the Indian anymore? He wants more money? Get a new Indian. They just changed the people! But I didn't want to write a memoir. I wanted to

MATTHEW BUDMAN is editor-in-chief of *The Conference Board Review*.

focus on the possibilities of what narrative could mean to business folks.

And the story can be *any* story—your own experience, something you’ve observed, history, news, war, books, television, metaphor, analogy. Look at religious myths—whether it’s Noah’s Ark or Adam and Eve or anything in the Koran or Torah or New Testament, they’re all stories! Embedded is the mythic value and ethics of a religion or a police system or a tribe, and how do you remember them? You remember the story of Cain and Abel.

YOU ARGUE THAT “THE HEART IS ALWAYS THE FIRST TARGET IN STORY TELLING,” MUCH MORE SO THAN THE HEAD OR THE WALLET. IS THAT TRUE EVEN AT A TIME WHEN EVERYONE IS THINKING HARD ABOUT THEIR WALLETS?

Absolutely. It doesn’t mean that economic considerations aren’t important. They always are. But if you aim at people’s wallets, you’ll never ignite their passion, you’re not going to find a way to connect with them emotionally, and you’re certainly not going to build a relationship.

NOW, STORYTELLING REQUIRES PATIENCE ON THE PART OF LISTENERS, AND AS YOU POINT OUT, “BUSINESS STORY TELLERS DON’T HAVE THE BENEFIT OF A DARKENED MOVIE THEATER OR SOUNDTRACK TO INTERRUPT THE PATTERN OF THE AUDIENCE’S THOUGHTS.” HOW DO YOU GET THEIR ATTENTION?

Well, whether it’s in person or online, you have to disrupt the cacophony in their minds and capture their attention before you get their *intention*, so to speak. When you’re in the room face to face, you have the opportunity to see where they’re at. Right now, we’re on the phone, and you’re sitting in another room. I don’t know what you’re doing: You might be writing a letter to your wife, you might be having lunch, you could be listening to music at the same time, you could be looking at your e-mail, you could be thinking about a problem you’re having with your plumbing. Five things! All at the same time! I’ve got to break through that.

It’s much easier if you’re sitting in the room—I could understand what else you’re doing and rip those things out of your hands if I have to in order to really engage you. If you’re in the same room as your audience—looking in their eyes, breathing the same air, seeing their body language, knowing what else is going on—you have a better chance of capturing their attention.

YOU HAVE MY FULL ATTENTION.

But even if you’re not in the same room, you use the same techniques: Don’t try to be interesting—be *interested*. Now, I have a better chance of knowing what you’re interested in if I’m in your office, looking at your pictures and decorations, seeing where you live and what the nature of your business is, than I do if we’re on the phone. If we’re going to talk on

the phone, I could do research on you or talk to people who know you. Everyone has so much backstory and has so much going on that without knowing some of it, I may not be able to break through the noise.

BUT RIGHT NOW, YOU AND I ARE 2,700 MILES APART. IT’S INCREASINGLY HARD TO GET PEOPLE IN THE SAME ROOM THESE DAYS. HOW MUCH OF AN IMPACT DOES THAT HAVE ON HOW EFFECTIVE A STORYTELLER CAN BE?

Well, you play the game with the clubs you’ve got, on the course you’re playing. If this is my best opportunity to convince you to, for example, be appreciative, supportive, and demonstrative about my book, then I’ll design the story around that consideration. I either ride the horse that you’ve given me to ride, or I have to try to get you on a different horse, which is harder. It starts with listening to what you’re telling me, what your situation is, who you are, how you’re feeling, what you’re interested in.

YOU WRITE THAT A BIG PART OF SUCCESSFUL STORYTELLING IS BEING AN ACTIVE LISTENER, AND THAT “MOST BUSINESSPEOPLE FAIL TO LISTEN ACTIVELY AND PROBE INTELLIGENTLY BECAUSE THEY DON’T SHUT UP LONG ENOUGH TO DO SO.”

A good teller of purposeful stories is a great listener, and that listening has to be an *active* listening, an *empathetic* listening. You’ve got to have an acute sensitivity to clues in your audience, to tell how they’re responding, how they’re interacting. You want them to be participants, not just listeners, in telling your story. If you think that telling a purposeful story is a one-person event, then you’re in trouble. You’re telling it to somebody, and that person is in the room, and unless you consciously engage them, you’re going to miss the opportunity to *move* them.

AND YOU NOTE THAT BUSINESSPEOPLE HAVE AN ADVANTAGE WHEN THEY COMMUNICATE THROUGH “ORAL NARRATIVE” RATHER THAN “THROUGH DOCUMENTS AND MEDIA PRESENTATIONS.”

About a zillion percent, because that’s the way we’re wired. We’re not wired as digital creatures or written creatures—we’re wired as *tellers*. We have a voice; we have a rhythm; we have a presence. Words are only 25 percent of communication.

BUT WITH AN EMPHASIS TODAY ON METRICS AND SHORT-TERM FINANCIAL TARGETS, IS NARRATIVE LESS EFFECTIVE THAN IT ONCE WAS? OR ARE STORIES MORE EFFECTIVE, BECAUSE THEY’RE A DIFFERENT KIND OF INPUT THAN WE’RE NOW USED TO?

More effective. People usually ask for all the emotion to be taken out of a presentation: Just give me the deck, let me look it over with my CFO, and I’ll tell you whether or not we’ll do it. Here’s the difference: I would never make a deal or

arrangement with anybody unless I was in the room, breathing the same air, and felt a sense of composure and honesty about the people. There needs to be a basis in fact *and* a basis in emotion. You have to listen to both parts.

AND IT'S UP TO THE STORYTELLER TO DELIVER BOTH THOSE THINGS. IN *TELL TO WIN*, YOU DESCRIBE "HOW YOU BUILD A STORY" TO GET LISTENERS' ATTENTION, GIVE THEM AN EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCE, AND GALVANIZE THEIR RESPONSE. IT'S A TALL ORDER.

Look: When you tell a purposeful story, you have to have a

they are. Telling stories gives them a purpose, a meaning, a significance; it gives them value judgments and tools for how to behave.

It's inside everybody! For some reason, we think that digital technology has whisked it all away. It's just another iterative form of storytelling! The written word was a technology, and some people think we have only another couple hundred years left with that technology. But the oral word will be here forever. And since words are only, again, maybe 25 percent of what you're communicating, a sense of congruence must shine through in your telling. Otherwise your words are vacant.

If you aim at people's wallets, you'll never ignite their passion, you're not going to find a way to connect with them emotionally, and you're certainly not going to build a relationship.

goal. If you don't have a goal, you won't be successful. *Vote for my political candidate, join my church, contribute to my charity, give me a raise, promote me.* All stories, and storytelling, are goal-oriented: *Laugh, buy my DVD, buy my video.*

Telling—and listening to—purposeful stories is in all of us. It's inherent. That's how it works. For thirty thousand years, we told stories around campfires so that the new people would know what the rules, beliefs, and values of the tribe are. It tied people together. You think that frickin' LinkedIn created social cohesion? Social cohesion is what happened thirty thousand years ago, when we had to go from the bottom of the food chain to the top. We created tribes, beliefs, myths, and religions, with all the stories and rules and values, so we could hold ourselves together. The strategies and tactics and analytics were embedded in those stories—*why you don't go into the woods, why you do this particular thing when a baby is born.* The reason why they told stories? So you'd remember the lessons!

Thirty thousand years of stories. LinkedIn and Facebook: one second. Which do you think is inside you? Thirty thousand years! It's in your DNA!

When people say that LinkedIn and Facebook have created tribes and social networking, I say, go to New Guinea! Go to Ethiopia! I did both. You'll see tribes that are cut off from written language, they're cut off from technology, they have no clothes, they have bones in their noses. What do they do? They tell stories to their novices, to the young people, to the women who are pregnant. They tell stories that make people feel connected, and they act together to beat tougher opponents—animals and environments that are far tougher than



YOU TALK ABOUT HOW PURPOSEFUL STORIES "CLEVERLY CONTAIN INFORMATION, IDEAS, EMOTIONAL PROMPTS, AND VALUE PROPOSITIONS THAT THE TELLER WANTS TO SNEAK INSIDE THE LISTENER'S HEART AND MIND." IS IT REALLY POSSIBLE TO BE *THAT* ARTFUL? DON'T A LOT OF LISTENERS AUTOMATICALLY ROLL THEIR EYES WHEN THEY HEAR A STORY WITH A MORAL?

If the moral is the whole story, front and center, and the call to action is not embedded in the story, then of course it'll be a piece of bombast or, worse, ineffective. But I don't think

listeners roll their eyes when they hear a story with a moral—I just don't think they hear the story. It's not a question of being artful—it's a question of being efficient and effective. The art is in the story itself, and the telling of the story. You want to embed the information in the story so it becomes resonant and memorable. It's actionable only if the person listening to the story is moved by it emotionally.

I didn't invent purposeful storytelling. There's no pride of authorship here. All I've done is shine a light on something that's in every single person: *Hey, this thing that moved you to look at the world when you were 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11 years old—this is the secret sauce. You already have it!* It's frickin' easy. And to begin communicating through stories, you don't have to be Robert Frost; you don't have to be Jack Welch.

OK, ONE DOESN'T HAVE TO BE ROBERT FROST OR JACK WELCH. BUT SURELY IT HELPS TO BE, AS YOU ARE, IN SHOW BUSINESS.

No, no, no, no—you're in show business too! *Everyone* is in show business. Every piece of information you try to communicate that doesn't carry emotion just swirls around and disappears. You're not wired for just information. You're wired for 3-D, 5-D energy, 6-D emotion. That's who we are. We *crave* it. We look for it. We suck it up. That's why we love campfires and television and entertainment and sports—there are real stories. There's aliveness. The facts and information are embedded in *experience*. If you're breathing, you're in the emotional transportation business!

And this is such a simple idea that the fact that it's not coached and taught in business school and law school and film school and medical school is insane. *Insane!* People have abandoned one of our most important tools of communication, or decided that it's soft stuff. When the chips are down, it's soft stuff that really counts. Ask somebody about when they're in terror or when they're in pain or when they're joyful or when they have desire or when they've failed or when they've succeeded. What do they do? They tell a story.

Ask somebody about why they believe in a product. When they explain why, they don't list the benefits of the product—they describe their experience with it. And how is the product sold? That's how it's sold. One toilet paper versus another toilet paper. What's the benefit? You tell a story about it. You don't say, *It's white, and it has squares.* You say, *It makes you feel good.* You explain the benefits in emotional terms.

The best teller of stories wins. Barack Obama is a teller of stories. Bill Clinton is a teller of stories. Ronald Reagan was a teller of stories.

And again, I didn't make this up! This has nothing to do with *me!*

YES, BUT YOU EXPLAIN IT MORE ENTHUSIASTICALLY THAN ANYONE EVER HAS.

Every piece of information you try to communicate that doesn't carry emotion just swirls around and disappears. You're not wired for just information.

I usually don't get wound up when I talk about this. I got wound up today. But you know what you'll remember? Here's what you'll remember: *This guy got wound up. He just went at it, and he was totally authentic.*

THAT'S EXACTLY WHAT I'LL REMEMBER.

Then it's a perfect example of how this works! What you want to remember is that every single time you tell a story, you have a goal. Why hide it? People see that you're hiding something, and they don't trust you. You need to have your intention clear before you go into the room. You have to be congruent. Make sure your feet, tongue, heart, and wallet are going in the same direction, because before you speak the first word, they know that. Then you ask yourself, who's the person I'm talking to? Am I talking to a customer or a client or a patron? They're protecting their balls and their wallet. You can't look at them that way. You have to look at them as an audience. Give them an experience. Let them *feel* it. Then embed the analytics and data. Then ask yourself, What's my goal? I want them to vote for my candidate, join my church, buy my product, give me the job. Don't hide that!

YOUR BOOK IS FULL OF STORIES THAT YOU'VE SEEN SUCCESSFUL PEOPLE USE TO MAKE THINGS HAPPEN. BUT YOU MUST HAVE HEARD ANY NUMBER OF OFF-TARGET STORIES THAT MISS THE MARK. HOW OFTEN DO YOU SEE STORYTELLERS GET IT WRONG?—MISJUDGE THEIR AUDIENCE OR JUST TELL AN INEFFECTIVE STORY?

All the time. I've done it many, many, many times. Why? Because I thought, *Oh, I have all the numbers and facts down—they're going to speak for themselves.* I've been looking at numbers my whole life. Have you ever seen a number speak for itself? It has to be explained! It has to be narrated! When someone says, *Here's what it means*, that's where you're moved—by the *meaning*. The benefit to you, the burden to

you, what it means in your life, what it means to your business, what it means to your career. *That's* what moves your heart and your emotion and *then* your feet and your wallet. *That's* where hits are born.

WHEN IT COMES TO YOUR OWN STORIES THAT DIDN'T WORK—

It's staggering. I could write another book called *Failure: My Partner in Success*.

IN THOSE, YOU'RE AWARE OF THE WHOLE BACKSTORY, AND YOU HAVE HINDSIGHT. WHEN OTHER PEOPLE'S STORIES BOMB, DO YOU SEE WHAT'S GOING WRONG RIGHT IN FRONT OF YOU?

Actually, you *feel* what's going wrong. It's not about the information—I don't get what's in it for me or what the goal is; I don't trust the teller. You end up saying, *I'll get back to you*.

WHAT'S THE MOST COMMON MISTAKE PEOPLE MAKE IN TELLING STORIES?

Not recognizing that they're in the room—metaphorically or legally or actually—with somebody else who wants to be a participant, not a passenger. If you want to move your audience, you must engage them, and the way to engage them involves, first, recognizing what's in it for them. If you engage them, their physiology metabolizes the information. What is important is not that someone will try to communicate with me through story—it's how they will tell it, when they will tell it, the context of their tell, and what the content is of their story. When someone uses a story inarticulately or incorrectly, when the tools aren't applied properly, it misses the target. All stories aren't good—you always have to pick the right story at the right time and tell it in the right way.

The Wrong Story

In 1992, when I was CEO of Sony Pictures, I made a trip to Berlin with Sony Corp.'s leadership Norio Ohga and Mickey Schulhof to visit the planned site of Sony's new European headquarters. We had just finished building a huge multiplex theater in Manhattan, complete with the latest Sony technology, and Ohga was in love with the idea of developing more state-of-the-art real estate. In Berlin, he wanted to create Sony's corporate headquarter with executive offices adjacent to an entertainment mega-center housing a multiplex, an IMAX theater, restaurants, and a food court. Since I'd played a key role in planning Sony's New York 67th Street multiplex, he wanted me to champion this new development as well. So far, so good. Berlin sounded like a dream canvas on which to paint a portrait of Sony's future.

Schulhof, a licensed jet pilot, flew us over on the corporate jet. We landed in a small mid-city airport and taxied under a massive overhang that seemed out of all proportion to the short runway. I wondered aloud what the story was behind this architecture, and Ohga said enthusiastically, "This is a great airport—Tempelhof. Hitler built this airport in the '30s! It is famous."

"Great," I said. "Hitler." I didn't think I needed to point out that he wasn't exactly my hero.

Apparently I was mistaken. Ohga completely missed my sarcasm. He was too busy charging ahead with his vision story of Sony Center as a gleaming citadel of technology that would rise from the ashes of Berlin's wartime past.

A few minutes later, we were standing in a wide-open field directly across from the Mercedes-Benz world headquarters. Ohga seemed to have a little extra steel in his strut as he told me Sony had already completed the purchase of this property—an enormous parcel of land smack in the middle of the rapidly expanding city. This was bigger and better than New York for what we wanted to accomplish. It seemed almost too good to be true.

"How come all this prime real estate was available?" I asked. "Was it a park?"

"No, no park." Ohga gestured at the bare ground and began to tell his story. "Back in 1945, this was a famous place. Down underneath here was Hitler's bunker—"

"Hitler's bunker!" I let out a yelp, the whole toxic story flooding my brain. "You're building Sony's headquarters on Hitler's bunker? You can't be serious!"

Ohga said matter-of-factly, "Peter, you work for Japanese. We were allies with Germany in the war." In other words, Ohga felt no prejudice against Hitler, so what was *my* problem?

I thought but didn't add: *Could you possibly have chosen a worse place to tell the story of your grand corporate vision?*

—PETER GUBER, excerpted from *Tell to Win: Connect, Persuade, and Triumph with the Hidden Power of Story*. Reprinted by permission of Crown Business, an imprint of the Crown Publishing Group, a division of Random House. ©2011 by Peter Guber.



If you want to move them, you must engage them, and the way to engage them is to recognize what's in it for them.

A NUMBER OF YOUR ANECDOTES CENTER ON AWARENESS OF THE AUDIENCE'S BACKSTORY. BUT EVEN IF YOU KNOW SOME RELEVANT FACTS—LIKE, IF SOMEONE'S FATHER DIED RECENTLY—HOW CAN YOU KNOW EXACTLY HOW YOUR STORY WILL AFFECT THE LISTENER? DON'T STORIES SOMETIMES BACKFIRE?

Absolutely. This is an imperfect process. But if you know that somebody is terrified of authority and you walk in with your Army uniform on, you're a blithering idiot. All they're going to see is that story. Preparation is really important when you want to tell a purposeful story: *What are they interested in?* And then—you drop the script. *Nobody* wants to be read a script. If you don't own it inside you, they can hear that.

Right now, you can hear that I'm talking to you spontaneously, with all the words slipping and sliding, about how I feel. You're experiencing that spontaneity. I'm not reading from a deck of PowerPoint slides. You can *tell* that! When you're with someone who's authentic and of the moment, you're *alive* with them. You're in the same boat.

WHAT ABOUT PEOPLE WHO ARE SIMPLY NO GOOD AT TELLING STORIES? IN YOUR BOOK, YOU DISCUSS SUCCESSFUL PEOPLE WHO SAY THEY CAN'T DO IT, BUT WHEN YOU TALK TO THEM IT TURNS OUT THEY ACTUALLY HAVE BEEN DOING IT.

All their lives, in every way.

ARE YOU INSISTING, THEN, THAT TRULY ANYONE CAN BE A SUCCESSFUL STORYTELLER?

Anyone can take five, seven, twelve strokes off their game. They're not going to be John Grisham; they're not going to be Obama or Clinton or Reagan or Welch. But anyone can do it, and if you can improve your chance of success by 20 percent, man, line me up for that medicine! You can work on this idea for an hour and increase your chances 10, 15, 20 percent of having a more successful result in everything you do in your business or your life. You don't have to call the doctor after four hours. Nothing bad will happen.

YOU KNOW, IT'S NOT AS EASY FOR MOST OF US TO COME UP WITH GOOD STORIES. WE HAVEN'T HAD YOUR LIFE EXPERIENCES FROM WHICH TO DRAW MATERIAL—YOUR ENCOUNTERS WITH THE LIKES OF MICHAEL JACKSON, MUHAMMAD ALI, FIDEL CASTRO, NELSON MANDELA, FRANK SINATRA—

Everybody has the same thing. Everybody goes to the bathroom, everybody has sex, everybody has people they love and people they hate, everybody's fallen down, everybody's gotten up. Everybody who's breathing has had the same experiences—they just came from a different place. And everybody on the planet has *observed* all the experiences, so they have all the stories. They have the complete dictionary of experiences in their heads and in their hearts. ■