



CUSTOMER DISCOVERY: Module 2, Episode 3 – Storytelling

TITLE:

Your Pitch As A Story

DESCRIPTION:

Applying the storytelling frameworks from the last episode, let's build out your startup's story and adjust it depending on the audience you're speaking to.

[LEARN@LIFT Episode Intro]

Welcome back everyone, and thank you for being here today on our concluding episode on Storytelling.

On our first two episodes, we discussed the importance of storytelling as a vehicle for effective communication, as well as the elements that comprise a great story.

As a quick refresher, we learned that brains love story because brains are obsessed with change. The brain stitches each unexpected change into a narrative, moving from one sequence of cause and effect into another, weaving a story around the change it experiences and its ability to re-adjust after the change event has passed.

And that is, inherently, what good story is about: it's about how the protagonist experiences and resolves change and learns from it.

We also learned that great stories are built from 6 basic elements: They are universal. They have clear structure and purpose. They appeal to our deepest emotions. They are surprising and unexpected. And they are simple and focused.

On today's episode, we're going to dig into how you can use this science of storytelling to build the best narrative about your startup.

If it's not clear by now, storytelling is how you successfully communicate to others what it is your startup is doing, because it taps into our brain's insatiable need to know, "what happens next?".

Whether you're talking to a friend, pitching to an investor, crafting an elevator pitch, mingling with strangers at a networking event, or building your brand, knowing what to say and how to talk about what your startup does is essential to your business' success.

So let's begin.

At the heart of your startup's story is the problem it is addressing and the customer it is addressing it for. In Pixar's terms, this is your purpose and your protagonist. Like any great story, your protagonist (or customer) has to be experiencing a problem that they need to solve, and they have to be someone your audience can relate to. Maybe they're even an underdog. This is where tapping into human emotions becomes important, as Pixar suggests. You paint, for your audience, a picture of the emotional reality that your customer is experiencing.

The more specific you can be about your protagonist's emotional experiences as a result of their problem, the more able you will be to elicit an emotional response from your audience. Remember, each brain in the audience, if drawn into a story that offers resolution to a change event, is hanging on the edge of its owner's seat, waiting to see what action can be taken.

As best you can, tie your protagonist's problem to one of the universal human conditions. For example, is your protagonist's problem about birth, about death, about growth, about conflict, about family, about self-fulfillment, about self-expression? It is likely not a direct link. But, if you can draw in these universal human conditions to your startup's purpose, it will feel more compelling to your audience.

After sharing what your protagonist's predicament is - with enough color to elicit an emotional response from your audience - offer your solution. Your resolution to their conundrum should be simple and focused. If you cannot explain your solution simply, then you do not know it well enough. Simplify. Simplify. Simplify.

Your solution should also clearly solve the problem at hand, in a way that clearly fits your customer's lived reality. For example, if your customer cannot get from floor one to floor two with ease, offering a staircase won't work if your customer uses a wheelchair for mobility. But, an elevator would. Know your customer and their lived experiences.

Starting out with a story helps your audience understand why your solution is critical. Your story helps them feel your customer's pain points so that they experience them as their own. Your story offers a solution that is so obvious as a response to this predicament that your audience wants to spring to action.

It's only after you have set the stage for your audience, drawing them into your protagonist's reality and offering your solution to their problem, do you share how your startup achieves this tactically.

Let's apply the Story Spine by Kenn Adams applied to a startup's narrative arc.

As a reminder, The Story Spine goes like this: Once upon a time there was [blank]. Every day, [blank]. One day [blank]. Because of that, [blank]. Until finally [bank].

Let's fill in those blanks a little more, as they relate to startups.

Once upon a time there was [my customer]. Every day, [my customer lived under the shadow of this particular problem and couldn't really solve it. There were some methods used, but, more than anything, my customer lived in some form of human emotion that made life not as enjoyable as it could be]. One day [as I was studying or living my customer's predicament, it dawned on me that I could solve it with my product or service]. Because of that, [I started

down this road to bring it into being, talking to these experts, putting these things together, and building this team to bring it to life.]. Until finally [my product/service was realized and my customer discovered my product/service and learned that there was a better way of experiencing their life].

Then talk about how it works [This is how it works. This is how it will be launched. This is how it will make money. These are some of the competitors, but this is how we know we are better than they are].

And end bringing the solution back to your customer's initial problem and how you're going to make their life better.

An easy way to visualize this is the Emotional-Rational-Emotional story arc curve created by speaker and business innovator, Chris Colbert. For this arc, picture an upside-down bell curve. At the top left, it starts out emotionally, then slopes down, becoming more rationally-focused, and then slopes back up to end on an emotional note. Always think of your pitches (whether short or long, formal or informal) as guided by this curve.

Ok, so we've talked about what to say, so now let's spend some time talking about how to say it.

First, it's important to note the context in which you are sharing your startup's story. Are you having an informal conversation? Are you describing your startup to a stranger? Are you pitching to a VC? Are you talking to a potential customer?

For each of these contexts, your story doesn't change, but the order and length do.

For example, in an informal conversation, if someone asks what you do, use a 30-second elevator pitch that describes your purpose and your protagonist and taps into the universal human condition.

The formula is: [what are you doing], [who are you doing it for], [what is the change you're going to instigate based on a universal human condition?]

For example, if you're building a startup that delivers groceries to people's homes, your 30-second elevator pitch could go something like this: "We are building a full-service grocery delivery business designed for parents that are too busy to visit a store, giving them back that precious time to spend with their families."

Instead of babbling on about everything that you're doing, give your recipient enough information that they're left questioning: How do you do that? Can you tell me more?"

When thinking about how to deliver your startup's story, the most important thing to remember is that you're dealing with a human. And that human is first and foremost a feeling being - even VCs who tout themselves as analytical - and is unconsciously sensing and processing all kinds of information.

Your first 60 seconds of interacting with whomever is in front of you are your most important storytelling moments. And not just about your startup's story. Delivery and presence are 50% of the storytelling equation. To captivate an audience, you yourself must be interesting. Your audience is picking up signals about you constantly, especially in those first few moments.

For the best results, be an actor in your story. You're not the protagonist, but the omnipotent narrator. Take a moment to connect with your audience, to be personal, to be an active listener. When sharing your pitch, be poised, present, and practiced. Practice your story. Many times. And move. Don't stay in one place, unless it's part of the script to do so.

Another thing to keep in mind is that humans hear stories all day. Reading, watching shows, movies, or ads, listening to songs, to podcasts, to lectures. Your story needs to stand out for it to be memorable. The best way to achieve this is to tap into emotions, and keep the narrative simple and focused. They won't remember what you said, but they'll remember how you made them feel and how simple your solution was.

I hope it's clear by now how important storytelling is to your startup. Without it, you'll get lost in the noise around you and often lose your chance to leave a lasting impression.

And, the great thing is, it's not that hard to build a good story around your startup's goals. Following a few simple steps and using a few general tools, you can create a story that captivates your audience, draws them into your protagonist's conundrum, and compels them to action.

So, how do you know whether you've crafted the best story you can?

The best answer to that question is this: at the end of a long day, would you want to hear yours?

[Insert episode closing]