COMPELLING
THE STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE FOR CAPTURING THE ATTENTION OF YOUR PROSPECTIVE CLIENTS AND CUSTOMERS

BY

JOHN KRAMP AND DAVID ATCHISON
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Imagine you have hired a marketing company to fill a large auditorium with potential customers and clients who all fit the criteria you prescribed down to the last detail. Each one needs what you have and is interested in buying.

Peeking from behind the curtain off-stage you think, “This is amazing. I can’t believe this company pulled this off.” Just then, the President of the marketing company moves you into the center of the stage, hands you a microphone and whispers in your ear, “These people have all agreed to listen to you for five minutes. We’re raising the curtain. Ready?”

“Wait,” you whisper back to her. “I need more than five minutes to talk about all the great things our company does and what we offer.”

Shaking her head, the marketing leader says, “I’m sorry. The deal we made to get these people here was that they had to stay for a minimum of five minutes. They could choose to stay longer but after five minutes, they would be free to leave.”

Seeing the panic in your eyes, she looks at you and says, “Don’t worry. Just tell the story you’ve prepared. You will do great.”
YOUR TURN ON STAGE

What if you were the person on that stage? What if you had five minutes to talk about what you do in a compelling manner?

Would you be ready?

What would you say?

You have to make this time count. Are you ready to tell a compelling story about your business?

Most business leaders are not.

They have their sales pitch down. Unfortunately, that's all it boils down to; one more sales pitch that blends into a noisy marketplace of sales’ pitches.

People hate sales pitches.

But people love stories.

We all know a great story when we hear one. We were created to process stories as the best way to take in new information.

So the best business and organizational leaders embrace people's preference for stories and talk about what they do in the simple framework of a story. Once you learn the secret, the process will become surprisingly simple.
ALL YOU NEED IS FOUR ESSENTIAL “Cs”

One of the most popular sessions in The Riverstone Group’s Board of Directors meetings deals with the business story. In that session, we lead our board members — owners and leaders of small businesses (as well as corporate leaders and executives) — to tell a business story anchored with four key words:

- Context
- Character
- Conflict
- Conclusion

We wrote this book to help you use this simple framework to craft your business story.

THE FIRST “C” IS CONTEXT

Great stories have a context, a setting in which everything happens.

In a historical novel, for example, the setting is in the past in a specific time and place. If we begin reading a story and can’t figure out the context, we become disoriented. We start asking, “Where are we? Why is this happening?”

Beginning writers often struggle with the setting of their stories. So do business leaders. They fail to clarify the setting of their businesses — that market or group of people they want to serve.

These context-challenged business leaders start talking enthusiastically about their businesses. But in short order, they see only dazed looks as they watch people’s eyes roll back in boredom. Often, the problem is that the story the business leader tries to tell does not match the context of the person listening.

Imagine standing on stage in a large, dark auditorium filled with people. A single spotlight blinds you. You have
five minutes to tell the audience about your business, a chain of assisted living options for active senior adults. After talking for a minute, you hear giggles and fidgeting from the crowd. You ask for the lights to come up. In horror, you realize you are speaking to a room full of college students. Someone has made a tragic booking error and lined you up to speak to the wrong audience.

That’s a context problem. You must tell your business story to the right group of people to have any hope of connecting with them.

THE SECOND “C” IS CHARACTER

Great stories hinge on vivid, compelling characters.

Business leaders inject strong characters into their stories. Unfortunately, they sabotage their stories by making themselves and their businesses the main characters. Later they wonder why their stories leave people with glazed eyes.

Like any other story, business stories need a compelling character. Someone the customer is interested in, someone who will draw the listeners or readers into the story. Powerful business stories have one such character — the customers themselves.

Compelling business stories always turn the potential customer into the main character.

If you tell people a story in which they are the stars, they will perk up and listen. So get the spotlight off of you, forget about why you went into business, how successful you have been, and how much you need to make this sale. No one cares.

But if you find a way to cast the customer as the central character in the business story you are writing, you are on the road to success.
THE THIRD “C” IS CONFLICT

Great stories all work the same way: we encounter a character in a context and suddenly that character encounters an incredible conflict.

In espionage and thrillers, the conflict often includes the potential destruction of the world. We keep reading because we want to find out how the character deals with a conflict of that magnitude.

So what do you call a story without conflict?

Boring.

Your compelling business story must confront your main character (the potential client or customer) with layer upon layer of conflict — real obstacles with serious implications. You must draw the character deeply into a collection of problems so pressing that they wonder if it is possible to escape.

The most effective business stories leave the main character, the potential client or customer, hanging in suspense and asking, “Is there any way out of this mess?”

THE FOURTH “C” IS CONCLUSION

Think of a story you have read and hated the ending. Frustrating, right?

You reach the last page of a book and say, “You’ve got to be kidding.”

Talk about no satisfaction.

In contrast, great stories resolve with a satisfying conclusion. The author pulls the loose ends together. We discover how the conflict changed the character.

Anyone who has ever read, heard, or seen a story expects nothing less from a great conclusion.
Yet most business stories fail to offer, much less deliver, a strong conclusion. Some business leaders get the context right. They feature the potential client or customer as the main character. They clarify the conflict through multiple problems. Then just as they have the fullest attention, they reveal the conclusion. And the client or customer says, “No way!”

In that moment, that potential customer becomes a lost customer. The proposed conclusion, solution, and resolution strikes them as a joke, inadequate at best and a scam at worst. They are done with your story. And what about your future with them? Forget about it.

Crafting your conclusion is one part of your business story you must get right the first time.

After articulating the conflict the customer is facing, you must demonstrate how your solution will remove that conflict. If you can’t or don’t remove the conflict by solving the problem, you will lose the opportunity to serve that potential client or customer.

EVALUATING YOUR CURRENT BUSINESS STORY

How to determine the effectiveness of your business story:

- Are you clear on the Context of your story?
- Have you featured the client or customer as the main Character?
- Is the Conflict real so that solutions are required?
- Is your Conclusion compelling and satisfying?

If you answered “no” to any of these four questions, you do not yet have a compelling business story. The good news is that you can. We have designed this book to guide you step by step through the process of creating your compelling business story.
Are you ready?

We need to do some work on crafting your story before your microphone is turned on and the curtain goes up. No time to waste. There is a room full of potential clients and customers waiting to hear a compelling story. It should be yours.
If you're ready to develop a compelling business story, the place to begin is with the first C—Context.

Most business leaders botch their business stories right from the start by confusing others with the context of the story. Even though “context” is only one of the four “Cs” in your compelling business story, it is profoundly important.

Every great story emerges from a setting, a context in which everything happens. From this context, interesting characters face hand-wringing conflict and move toward a satisfying conclusion that resolves everything.

But if the setting is wrong, the story dies before it lives. Readers fail to get their bearings and cannot enter into the story. They start out lost; they remain lost. So they stop listening.

So what is the context for your business story? Not sure? Not a problem. Just follow these three steps to get it right.
STEP 1: WHAT GROUP OF PEOPLE DO YOU WANT TO SERVE THROUGH YOUR BUSINESS?


Yes, but basic things trip up business leaders every day.
If someone says, “Tell me about your business?” can you state clearly who your target audience is and more importantly who your audience is not?
Most business leaders cannot.
They may fume with frustration and then say, “Well, we serve the general market.”
As they say in Tennessee, “That dog won’t hunt.”
Let’s say, for example, that you’re a realtor. Someone asks, “Who is your favorite type of client?” To which you respond, “Anyone who wants to buy or sell a house.” That may be true. But it is not helpful.
Imagine another realtor answering the same question with this response:

“I love working with couples in their fifties who are ready to move out of the house in which they raised their family and into the house that will meet their needs during the next chapter in their lives, including retirement.”

Is that a clear context?
Can you picture that type of customer?
If you were a realtor, would that be an attractive client?
Of course. Such clients will be selling larger homes in popular neighborhoods. They will want to move into something smaller but still nice. Usually, they will have the means to pay commissions without bickering, appreciate excellent service, and then readily recommend you to others.
Whatever your business is, you need a compelling business story that begins with a clear picture of the clients you would enjoy serving the most.

**STEP 2: MAKE THE CONTEXT VIVID SO IT IS CLEAR THAT YOU UNDERSTAND THE PEOPLE AND THE PLACE.**

Thousands of readers have enjoyed reading Pat Conroy's books. All his stories are set in South Carolina, often in and around Charleston. Conroy makes the context of his stories vivid with sights, sounds, smells, and even tastes.

Business leaders who write the best business stories master the same skills as a master writer. They describe the segment of the market they serve with passion and insight. They see the people with stunning clarity. Ask them, and these business leaders will regale you with stories about those they have served in their context over the years.

The realtor serving downsizing 50-year-olds, will tell you about the Robertsons, the Myers, and the DeWitts. In an industry meeting, she can describe the demographic breakdown, the per capita income, the trends, and preferences. But she will not rely on a stale Powerpoint presentation; she will opt instead for compassionate stories about clients served and problems solved.

The more vivid you can make the context of your business story, the more compelling your story will become. Doing so will demonstrate expertise as well as commitment. Your love for people in a particular stage of life or those facing specific problems will set you apart from all others who claim to serve everyone.

A story set everywhere is a story set nowhere.

It’s the same for your business story. The context is what connects your potential clients and customers to you. So lay a solid foundation for your business story. Ground your story in a vivid context and you’ll be surprised by the impact on others and on you.
STEP 3: FOCUS ON A CONTEXT THAT CAPTURES YOUR ATTENTION.

Every story requires a setting, a context. But great writers set their stories in a context that evokes emotions in them.

The context may be painful to the writer, or it may be wistful, or perhaps a combination of both. But the reader always knows when the creator of the story is captivated by the story. For example, when you read a Pat Conroy story, you know he loves South Carolina and especially Charleston.

Many business owners crash and burn at this point.

When asked to write a powerful business story beginning with the context, it becomes clear that they do not like the business they are in or the segment of people their businesses serve.

So why did they go into this business? The answers vary.

- For some, the business passed down to them from their family.
- For others, it was a growing business segment and they saw an opportunity to make money.
- For others, they went into the business, enjoyed it for a while, but over the course of time lost their interest and passion.

Here’s the brutal truth: no one will be more excited about your business story than you.

Rediscover your love for your business, the people you serve, and the problems you solve. Focus on the privilege, not the problems. Think back on the best days rather than the worst.

No business context is perfect. All come with jumbo-sized sets of problems. If you change businesses, you’ll simply get a different package of problems.

Before you quit, think about all you know about the business you are in and the segment you serve. The time you have invested may have actually given you unique insights that position you as an expert qualified to tell a compelling business story.
UNLOCKING THE POTENTIAL OF A POWERFUL CONTEXT

Many fiction writers set their stories in a specific city or a region of the country. The writer returns to that setting repeatedly and launches a new story.

As a business leader, you can tap into the power of this principle. By focusing on one or a few central “contexts” for your business, you can launch a lifetime of work.

For example, we enjoy listening to Cliff Ravenscroft, The Podcast Answer Man. What’s the context for his business? You guessed it — people interested in podcasts. Cliff taps into his passion for podcasting and his desire to help current or new podcaster develop incredible businesses. Would you have thought about podcasters as a context? Cliff did and has reaped the results of that focus.

So what about you? What is the context, the setting, for your business story? Who are you serving with passion? What stories do you tell with great joy and satisfaction?

Mine those and you’ll discover your context and take an important step toward crafting a compelling story for your business.

PULLING YOUR COMPELLING BUSINESS STORY TOGETHER

As you move through this book, we encourage you to begin drafting your business story. In order to help you get started, we will share parts of a business story we wrote for a landscape and gardening company that you can use as an initial template. We call this the “How to Make More Money When You Sell Your House” story.

Part 1: Context

“If the last few years have taught us anything, it’s that owning and selling a home is a complicated proposition.”
Do you see the Context for this story? It is set in the real estate market and involves the chaotic and often confusing process of home ownership. For most people, owning and then selling their largest asset creates a great deal of uncertainty. As a result, if you craft a story for homeowners, home buyers, or home sellers, you will have thousands of interested people because of your Context.

YOUR TURN:

Now it’s your turn to take a stab at writing the context for your business story. Remember this is just a draft. It doesn’t have to be perfect; it just needs to get you started.

Part 1: The Context for My Business Story

“If the last few years have taught us anything, it’s that . . .”

“One thing we know is that people worry about having enough money . . .”

“Every parent dreams that one day . . .”

“Anyone with an aging parent worries . . .”

Use these to get started but find a simple sentence that sets the Context for your compelling Business Story. At the end of each chapter, we’ll add another element in the model story.
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Begin capturing the parts of your story in the sections below.

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One of the main reasons businesses, especially small businesses, fail is because they do not have a compelling business story to tell.

Ask most business leaders, “What do you do?” and they will talk. Unfortunately they will not tell an engaging story that hooks a listener.

In this book, we’re focusing on the four “Cs” in a compelling business story. In the last chapter, we explained why the Context of your story is essential. Now we add another element — the central Character in your story.

THE MAIN CHARACTER IN YOUR BUSINESS STORY

While context is important, the characters in that context make a great story possible.

Characters must be clear, compelling, and engaging. The story tells what specific characters do in a specific context or setting.

This is the point at which business leaders often botch their stories. In a compelling business story, there is one central character — the potential customer or client.
Unfortunately, business leaders tend to knock the customer or client off the stage and position themselves as the center of attention. Business leaders find stories about themselves fascinating. Potential customers and clients? Not so much.

In essence, potential customers and clients ask themselves one simple question:

“Can I see myself in this story?”

If they can’t, they move on.

But if they can see a starring role for themselves, they perk up and begin listening to the story.

So how do you make sure your potential clients and customers are the main characters in your business story?

We would be lying if we said it’s easy. But if you understand the importance of this principle to your business, you can implement the following three steps to lay a foundation for success.

**STEP 1: INTRODUCE YOUR MAIN CHARACTER.**

Here’s how this works.

When someone within your business context asks, “What does your business do?” you respond, “Well, actually, we started this business to help you.”

After the person reacts, you say, “I know that sounds odd, but it’s really true. While we didn’t know you initially, we focused all of our energy on understanding the needs of people like you so we would be prepared for the day we actually met you.”

Clearly, you cannot say this with integrity if you haven’t taken the time to understand the needs of people in the target market you serve (the context for your business). Likewise, you cannot make this claim if you run a scatter-shot business, focusing on anyone with a dollar to spend (not a good strategy, by the way).
The fastest way to succeed in business is to find a group of people you really want to know, understand, and serve; people you are willing to make the main characters in your compelling business story.

**STEP 2: DISCOVER MORE ABOUT YOUR MAIN CHARACTER.**

As you continue your conversation with your prospective client or customer, you must say, “Although we have worked hard to understand the needs and challenges someone like you faces, we know there is much more we need to learn. We hope you’ll give us the opportunity to get to know you better and learn from you.”

No one wants to feel “niche-a-sized.”

While we know that the “personalized” results Amazon gives us are really the end-result of a dehumanized data-mining process, it’s nice to see offers and options tailored for our interests. It’s the same in our ongoing interactions with prospective clients and customers.

In a great story, we discover more about the main character over time. No story begins with a 50-page biography of the main character; information unfolds through what happens in the story.

In the same way, you will be on thin ice with your potential clients and customers if you suggest that you know 100% about them from the beginning. That’s insulting, creepy actually. And it’s dead wrong.

People will be pleased that you have focused your business on them and their needs, but they know there is infinitely more you need to know.

As long as you acknowledge that you don’t know everything but honestly want to know more, people will begin opening up . . . especially if they can see themselves in starring roles.
STEP 3: DEMONSTRATE EMPATHY FOR YOUR MAIN CHARACTER.

Have you ever started a story and discovered that you disliked the main character? Most of us have. After 50 to 100 pages of the book, we say, “I don’t care two licks about what happens to this guy.” And with that, we close the book and pitch it.

Every great story focuses on a central character that evokes empathy. We care about the character and wonder what will happen. That’s why we keep reading.

In your compelling business story, you differentiate yourself from other businesses by focusing clearly on a potential client or customer as your main character. You make it clear that this story is about him or her. You establish that you’ve worked hard to learn all you can but know you have much more to learn. But here comes the big question — “Why?”

We’re all skeptical. While we may be flattered that a business focuses on us and our needs, we want to know the focus involves more than a transaction. Sure, we understand that businesses must make money to stay in business. But we want to do business with people who demonstrate that they care about us, our situation, and our challenges.

We want to do business with people who engage us with empathy. Not manipulating us. Not plying us with a drip-irrigated marketing system of focus-group-tested words and images designed to run us like rats through a maze, prodding us along with rewards.

Most of us hate the phrase, “It’s not personal; it’s just business.”

Guess what? In business, it’s all personal.

CONTEXT + CHARACTER = A GOOD START (BUT ONLY A START)

Would you continue to read a book with an interesting context with a character you cared nothing about? No, of course not.
In a great story, we learn more about the character through the conflict that character encounters. No conflict; no story.

Don’t worry. We’ll discover practical ways to infuse your business story with conflict (the good kind) in the next chapter.

For now, here are the important steps you can take.

- **Think about your potential customers or clients.**
- **Can you see them?**
- **Are they clear in your mind?**
- **Do you know enough to engage them and convince them that they are the focus of your business?**
- **Check your empathy. Is this a group of people or an individual you care enough about to invest in, to understand more fully, with the goal of meeting needs and solving problems?**

If so, you’re ready to install the engine that will drive your powerful business story – Conflict. But first we have some work to do.

**PULLING YOUR COMPELLING BUSINESS STORY TOGETHER**

As you think about the main character in your business story, we want to help you add to your draft.

Remember in the sample business story (The “How to Make More Money When You Sell Your House” story) that we wrote about a landscape and gardening company? Here is part 2 of that story:
Part 2: Character

“You’re a savvy homeowner. You know you will sell your home at some point, next week or in the next decade, and you want to make the most money possible.”

Who is the character in this business story? The prospective client or customer in this story is the homeowner to whom you are telling the story.

How do we describe the character?

He is savvy, informed, aware and knowledgeable. Not only that, he wants to make wise decisions that will impact the long-term value of his home, this important asset.

This “savvy homeowner” is the Character at the core of the story.

YOUR TURN

Now identify and introduce the main character in your business story. Remember this is just a draft. It doesn’t have to be perfect; it just needs to get you started. Here are some statements to get you moving forward.

• You are a concerned parent . . .
• You are value-conscious investor . . .
• You are a responsible caregiver for your aging parents . . .
• You are a motivated small business owner . . .
• You’re an exceptional corporate leader on the fast track . . .
• You’re someone who works hard and takes your recreation seriously . . .
You’ll be able to think of other statements that will tie in with your specific business segment. Now review the first two elements in the model story.

THE “HOW TO MAKE MORE MONEY WHEN YOU SELL YOUR HOUSE” STORY

| CONTEXT                                                                                             |
| “If the last few years have taught us anything, it’s that owning and selling a home is a complicated proposition.” |

| CHARACTER                                                                                          |
| “You’re a savvy homeowner. You know you will sell your home at some point, next week or in the next decade, and you want to make the most money possible.” |

| CONFLICT                                              |
|                                                      |

| CONCLUSION                                            |
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If you want to capture the attention of your prospective clients and customers, your business story must include Conflict.

In case you haven’t thought about conflict as writers do, here’s a suggestion to get you started. Watch Michael Douglas in the thriller, *The Game*. This movie illustrates the importance of conflict in any great story.

Douglas’ character, Nicholas Van Orton, gets robbed, chased by bad guys and really mean dogs, shot at (multiple times), locked in the backseat of a fast-moving taxi with no driver, wakes up in a crypt in Mexico after being drugged, and much more. Watching the movie, you’ll ask, “How in the world will this poor guy make it through?” That’s conflict — what happens to a character in a context that propels the story.

Great stories include great conflict.

Unfortunately, business stories often stink in this area.

As we saw in Chapter 1, if business leaders fail to set the context for their business stories, prospective clients and customers become disoriented and are not sure if the business story is for them.
Then in Chapter 2, we noted that most business leaders present themselves as the central character of their story rather than casting the potential client or customer in that role.

Yet these mistakes are minor compared the issue of conflict. If your business story lacks conflict that matters to your potential customer or client, you’re sunk.

Fear not. If you’ve ever read a good book or watched a great movie, you understand conflict intuitively. Now you simply need to transfer what you already know about your business and infuse your business story with conflict that is so compelling that it draws those potential clients and customers deeper and deeper into the story, begging for answers and resolution.

But let’s not get ahead of ourselves. Your assignment now is to add conflict to your business story. Here are some practical ways you can do so.

**STEP 1: MAKE A LIST OF YOUR CHARACTER’S HOPES AND FEARS.**

For sake of simplicity, we’ll refer to your potential customers or clients as your “character.” Start by asking questions.

- **What does my character want but is struggling to achieve?**
- **What dreams does my character have?**
- **What frightens my character?**
- **What is my character afraid to lose?**

How will you know this? You’ll ask. You’ll research. But you must know.
In our work as business consultants at The Riverstone Group, we know about the characters in our business story.

- Business leaders want their companies to grow and fear stagnation.
- They worry they are behind and that changes in the market and new technology may make them obsolete.
- Business leaders wonder who they can talk to with full confidentiality; who knows enough to help them solve immediate problems, not just plaster them with platitudes.
- These leaders feel lonely and isolated.
- They wonder if their businesses are wrecking their lives, their marriages, and their families.
- More than anything, they wonder if anyone else has ever felt like they do.

We empathize because we’ve been there and felt that.

The specific set of hopes and fears shift from character to character and business to business. But you will jump-start your compelling business story by thinking clearly about your character — your potential customer or client.

**STEP 2: FOCUS ON 1 TO 3 CONFLICTS THAT MATTER TO YOUR CHARACTER AND THAT CONNECT TO YOUR BUSINESS.**

As an example, let’s imagine that your business sells specialty ladders for painters. If so, you must focus on conflicts painters face that connect in some way to ladders.
Sounds hard, right? It’s not. Here are a few examples:

- Does your painter worry about falling and getting injured or killed?
- Does he worry about his time and using his time more efficiently?
- Is he concerned about damage to a customer’s house that would cost him money?

If you talked to a group of painters, you could develop a much longer list. Notice, though, that even the three items listed include hopes and fears. Behind those questions you can find true conflict your character is facing.

**STEP 3: DEVELOP A “CONCENTRIC CIRCLE OF CONFLICT” FOR YOUR CHARACTER.**

Let’s stay with painters for a moment and focus on one conflict element related to ladders — falling. Now let’s develop a Concentric Circle of Conflict around that one element.

Imagine your character, the painter, asking, “What will happen if I fall?”

- “I may be injured and not be able to work. How could I provide for my family?”
- “I could die, what would happen to my family then?”
- “I could damage a client’s home and incur hundreds or thousands of dollars of damages.”
- “I could ruin my reputation and lose clients for the future.”

You could go on and on, starting with the center circle (“What will happen if I fall?”), and adding concentric circles that capture the core hopes or fears your character faces.

The more circles of conflict you can develop, the more likely you can engage your character in the story.
STEP 4: DO YOUR RESEARCH ON THE MOST IMPORTANT CONFLICT ELEMENTS.

Let’s keep going with painters as our characters.

What are the basic questions you need to answer that would establish you as an authority on the issues painters face? Here are some suggestions.

- How many painters are injured by falling from ladders each year in the U.S.?
- How many die from their injuries?
- When a painter falls, how many days of work, on average, does that painter lose?
- What is the potential lost income from those lost days of work?
- What are the most important research-based findings on safety for people working with ladders?

Could you find answers to these questions? We’re confident you could if you took the time to search online.

Finding answers to these kinds of questions is part of what The Riverstone Group does with our clients. It’s amazing the amount of research you can collect on topics focused directly on the people you want to serve.

So which of the following two options would be more compelling as you include elements of “conflict” in your powerful business story?

- Option 1: “Many painters get hurt each year by falling off ladders.

- Option 2: “Each year, $X$ (number) of painters are injured in the U.S. resulting in $Y$ (number) of days in lost income, totaling $Z$ (dollars).”

If you’re serving painters, you’ll have their full attention with Option 2.
STEP 5: REPEAT THE PROCESS FOR OTHER CONFLICT ELEMENTS.

Now that you have a solid understanding of the “safety” conflicts painters confront, move on to the “efficiency” element. Then, after that, work on the “damage to the customer’s home” element.

Once you have 3-5 elements clearly in your mind, backed up by research when possible, you are positioned perfectly to add one or more of these elements to your business story.

DON’T TOLERATE A BORING BUSINESS STORY

Whatever your business, you can stand out from the competition if you write a compelling business story with a clear setting (the market segment or target audience you want to serve), an appealing character (a potential customer or client you understand and with whom you empathize), and riveting conflict tailored for your character.

If you watch Michael Douglas in The Game, you’ll wonder, “How is this going to end?” You’ll expect things to come together in some satisfying way, but until the last few minutes of the film, you will not be able to imagine how.

The conflict in the story will keep you wondering and engaged.

It’s the same for you as you write your compelling business story. Work on the Concentric Circles of Conflict for your potential customers or clients and you’ll be ready for the big finish in the next chapter.
PULLING YOUR COMPELLING BUSINESS STORY TOGETHER

As you think about creating the conflict in your business story, keep adding to your draft and crafting your story. In the sample business story (the “How to Make More Money When You Sell Your House” story), we focused on a landscape and gardening company. Here is part 3 of that story:

Part 3: Conflict

“Did you know that X percent of homeowners lose money when they sell their homes? Did you know that Y percent of homeowners sell their homes for significantly less than the ideal buyer was willing to pay?”

Bam!

That sentence creates the conflict in this business story. No one wants to lose money. No one wants to miss out on extra profits. However, in this business story, those listening realize this could happen to them. Can you see those potential clients and customers begin to fidget and shift in their chairs? The conflict is causing them to be uncomfortable. And that’s just what you want to happen as you move them toward your Conclusion. Before we get there, here’s some work you need to do first.
YOUR TURN

Begin to identify conflicts

• Did you know that X percent of people like you discover that they are unable to ________________?

• Did you know that X percent of people end up losing Y percent of ________________ because they were not prepared for ________________?

• Did you know that X percent of teenagers walk away from their family’s values in college and Y percent never return to those values?

• Did you know that X thousand people are hurt or killed each year as a result of ________________, something that could be easily avoided?

• Did you know that you can save X hours per day/week by using ________________?

• Did you know that X thousand people each year discover they ________________ and have less ________________ than they need to meet their goals?

• Did you know that X thousand families each year discover that they lack the resources to ________________, a problem that could have been avoided easily if they had acted sooner?

Just think about the people you serve in your business. Don’t worry about having all the specific numbers and percentages. Determine the type of data you wish you had because you know it would interest your prospective clients and customers. Then you can either gather the data on your own or hire someone to do that for you.
### THE “HOW TO MAKE MORE MONEY WHEN YOU SELL YOUR HOUSE” STORY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CONTEXT</th>
<th>“If the last few years have taught us anything, it’s that owning and selling a home is a complicated proposition.”</th>
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<tbody>
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</table>
Now continue capturing the parts of your story in the sections below.

### YOUR STORY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CHARACTER</td>
<td><em>(Add your draft statement from Chapter 2)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONFLICT</td>
<td><em>(Add your new statement for this chapter.)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
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Recently a friend told me about a novel series he was reading. He beamed as he talked about the trilogy, saying, “The story is fantastic. They’re even making a series of movies based on the books.”

Purchasing the trilogy and starting the first book seemed to confirm the great tip from this friend.

A month later, this same friend mentioned the series and said, “I finished the third book and I hated the ending. It was terrible, truly awful.”

Not exactly what a reader wants to hear halfway into Book 1 of a trilogy. Yet we have all said something like these statements:

- “I was really disappointed with the way that book ended.”
- “I hated the ending to that movie.”
- “When it finally got to the end, I felt ripped off.”
You may have enjoyed the context (or setting) of the story. The characters may have fascinated you. The conflict may have kept you flipping pages or glued to your seat in the theater. But if the ending was a dud, you’ll trash the book and slam the movie.

It’s the same thing with your business story.

In this book, we’re tried to make the case that you need to talk about your business to prospective clients or customers using the basic structure of a story — **Context, Character, Conflict, and Conclusion**.

So are you ready for a progress check?

- **Have you developed a clear **Context **for your business story, picturing a roomful of your prospective customers and clients? Review Chapter 1.**

- **Have you moved yourself out of the starring role in your story so that you can make your prospective clients and customers the main **Characters**? If not, read through Chapter 2 one more time.**

- **Does your business story include **Conflict** (problems, obstacles, and challenges) that matter to your prospective clients and customers? Do you have research on those problems that position you as an expert? If not, continue working with the material in Chapter 3.**

We’re confident you’ve done great work, but you’re not done. Now you must craft a “killer” **Conclusion**.

Ready?
Here are three practical steps you can take to make sure you get the results you desire:

**STEP 1: PROVIDE AN ELEMENT OF SURPRISE IN YOUR CONCLUSION.**

People don’t finish books if the story is predictable. People don’t like movies with overused endings. It’s the same with your compelling story. You must end your story with something surprising, something your prospective customer or client doesn’t see coming.

Sure, you must find a way to connect the conflict (the problem, fear, or concern) to your business, but don’t cop out, saying, “Clearly, you need what we offer.” That’s what people are expecting you to say. Work harder and find a way to catch them off guard and slip in something unpredictable.

- **Offer a free resource that positions you as the expert.**
- **Offer a free assessment that will help them address the problem with proven results.**
- **Invite them to an online seminar in which you answer the most frequently asked questions.**
- **Tell a story about the results you have helped clients achieve with simple solutions that they could use immediately.**

A great conclusion to a book or a great ending to a movie resolves the conflict in an unexpected way. That’s what makes it satisfying.
STEP 2: TIE EVERYTHING TOGETHER SO IT ALL MAKES SENSE.

Leave nothing hanging; leave no important questions unanswered.

A great conclusion and a satisfying ending pull everything together. Like gears clicking into place, suddenly, everything makes sense. That’s your task with your business story.

Through the conflicts you have raised based on the research you have cited, you have elevated the level of concern for those listening. If you’ve done a great job, they should be asking themselves, “I wonder how in the world I can solve these problems?”

Your next step is to assure them, “Yes, these are important issues, tough to solve. Fortunately, we have discovered a simple process that takes care of all the things we have discussed.”

Don’t drone on about every detail of the solution you are offering. Instead, tell them there is a proven solution that you have been using with clients and customers with outstanding results and you’re confident the solution will work for them.

All businesses center on solving problems people care about. If you wrap up your story with a well-reasoned way to make things better for people in unexpected ways, good things will happen for everyone — for them and for you.

On the other hand, if you can’t pull together all the threads of problems your prospective customers and clients are facing, it’s over. Rotten tomatoes will be flying your way and you will get no second chance.
STEP 3: INCLUDE A TEASER FOR THE SEQUEL.

The best writers and filmmakers wrap things up in a way that satisfies yet leaves people wanting more.

That’s your goal in your business story. You want to provide enough information and direction to provide a positive, unexpected solution, even a solution that is free initially.

Yet your highest priority is to earn the right to have the next conversation, to take things to the next step. Only then will your prospective client or customer open up enough to let you know the full scope of his or her needs and the lifetime value to you of meeting that need.

After all, isn’t our ultimate goal to accomplish more than making a sale to a customer or landing an assignment for a client? Isn’t the ultimate goal to make a customer or client for a lifetime?

That’s why offering a free but valuable resource — an e-book, an online video, a consultation, etc. — works so well to position you for the sequel, the next step in the relationship.

In most cases, an initial business story, no matter how compelling, will not be strong enough to convince prospective customers or clients to throw bags of money at you. That’s why your objective is to get the next opportunity to interact, to listen, to learn, and to serve.

Offering something free provides a powerful incentive and can be the best way to accelerate your customer and client acquisition.
PUTTING TOGETHER YOUR POWERFUL BUSINESS STORY

In the epilogue, we will explain the sample business story we use with Riverstone Group clients to help them develop their own stories.

In our consulting, whether we are meeting with our Riverstone Boards of Directors in the Nashville, Tennessee region or working with small business leaders, corporate leaders or executive leaders in other states, we have discovered that most leaders adapt existing stories more easily than they create from scratch. That’s why we provide all they need to get them started.

Without exception, we’ve seen leaders make incredible progress . . . even if they felt intimidated initially.

THREE IMPORTANT QUESTIONS

- Do you want to develop a compelling business story to use in your marketing?
- Do you think you can?
- How would a compelling business story differentiate you from your competitors?

We tell you what we tell all our clients: “If you want to, you can. Once you have your compelling business story, you’ll be ready to take your marketing and sales efforts to an entirely new level.” We will pull everything together in the next chapter.

PULLING YOUR COMPELLING BUSINESS STORY TOGETHER

The last section of the sample business story (the “How to Make More Money When You Sell Your House” story) brings the story to its conclusion, the hook that draws people into a long-term relationship with you.
PART 4: CONCLUSION

“Through our research, we have learned the precise steps you can take with landscaping to increase the resale price of your home, whether you are selling now or five years from now. Our book, “The 12 Most Important Steps You Can Take to Landscape Your Home to Increase Your Future Sales Price,” is free to you.”

Notice what just happened. Moments before, our main characters were pressed with their backs to the wall. They were on the verge of failing to maximize the money they could make selling their house because they didn’t know the financial impact of effective landscaping.

But now, thankfully, they can take a deep breath. We didn’t leave them hanging. We have the answer . . . an answer they did not even know they were looking for. And surprisingly, we have provided a free resource to help them immediately.

Do you think the outcome of that story would be different from a sales pitch offering lawn and gardening services? We do.
YOUR TURN

Begin to think about the type of simple resource you could provide for your prospective clients and customers that would provide real solutions to a problem they are facing while leaving the door open for you to begin a long-term relationship with them.

- A short booklet on, “The 12 Early-Warning Signs of ________________”
- A checklist for, “The 6 Best Solutions For ________________”
- The reprint of a research article on ________________.
- A complimentary inspection of ________________.
- A two-hour assessment of ________________.
- Access to a free, online webinar covering ________________.

Because you know your industry, you may think, “Everyone knows that.” Guess what? They don’t. So you have the opportunity to simplify what you know and share the information with them in an accessible format – written, online, or in person.

You may resist the idea of giving away solutions. Get over it. In the modern marketplace filled with so many solution providers, you must establish your expertise and differentiate yourself from the crowd. The best way to do that is to give your prospective clients and customers a sample of the extraordinary value you can provide to them if they decide to work with you or purchase your products.
Now continue capturing the parts of your story in the sections below.

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If you are in business, you need at least one compelling business story. This story will become the cornerstone of your marketing efforts. Over time, you'll add more stories. You must, however, have at least one.

That’s why we wrote this book focusing on each of the basic steps you can take to tell your story and advance your business.

THE FOUR “Cs” OF YOUR POWERFUL BUSINESS STORY

• The 1st “C” In Your Powerful Business Story: Context
• The 2nd “C” In Your Powerful Business Story: Character
• The 3rd “C” In Your Powerful Business Story: Conflict
• The 4th “C” In Your Powerful Business Story: Conclusion
Through consulting with all sorts of business leaders, from small business owners to executives, we’ve discovered that most make more progress on their business stories if they can adapt, rather than create, their story from scratch. With that in mind, here’s a simple guide you can use.

We’ve mentioned this simple business story we wrote about a landscape and gardening company throughout this book. We call this the “How to Make More Money When You Sell Your House” story. Here’s the story one more time.

“If the last few years have taught us anything, it’s that owning and selling a home is a complicated proposition.”

“You're a savvy homeowner. You know you will sell your home at some point, next week or in the next decade, and you want to make the most money possible.”

“Did you know that X percent of homeowners lose money when they sell their homes? Did you know that Y percent of homeowners sell their homes for significantly less than the ideal buyer was willing to pay?”

“Through our research, we have learned the precise steps you can take with landscaping to increase the resale price of your home, whether you are selling now or five years from now. Our book, “The 12 Most Important Steps You Can Take to Landscape Your Home to Increase Your Future Sales Price,” is free to you.”
WRITING A BUSINESS STORY THAT WORKS

This simple, concise story structure works to build credibility with prospective customers or clients. After you substitute the facts for your business, the structure will work for you. Here’s why:

• **The Context**— includes the right people.
  This is a story for homeowners who have survived the recent bubble-burst in the housing market and who know that housing prices do not always go up and that our homes are not ATM machines.

• **The Character**— puts the homeowner in the center of the story.
  This is NOT a story about the business owner (a landscape and gardening business); this is a story about a homeowner who is smart, will sell at some point, and doesn’t want to leave money on the table.

• **The Conflict**— raises concerns.
  A percentage of homeowners lose money when they sell. Others sell for less than their ideal buyer would pay. (Of course, the conflict elements you use must be backed up with objective facts based on your industry. The ones in this sample story simply illustrate the structure of a story.)

• **The Conclusion**— helps resolve the conflict.
  In this case, we inform homeowners that there are precise steps they can take to increase the selling price of their home and offer an informative booklet that addresses the problem. By the way, in our sample story, we reference research done by the Virginia Cooperative Extension, “The Effect of Landscape Plants on Perceived Home Value.” It’s fascinating and provides an example of the kind of information you might use to build your business story.
THE STORY THAT LEADS TO ANOTHER CONVERSATION

When business leaders hear the phrase, “A Compelling Business Story,” many flinch, imagining they are being asked to write a novel or at least a short story.

Far from it! A solid business story can be brief, 141 words like our model story.

You will not close a sale by having a compelling business story. You can, however, get the opportunity to have a second meeting with a prospective client or customer, positioned as an expert and differentiated from your competition because of your business story. That sort of outcome merits the effort required to craft your story.

Use this sample story. Substitute key phrases and facts from your own industry. You’ll be surprised how quickly you will write your compelling business story.
Our hope is that this step-by-step guide will give you all you need to craft and begin using *Your Compelling Business Story*.

Yet all of us in business appreciate help from others as we take steps to grow our businesses. That’s why we offer the following services to help you if you need them.

**FREE OPTIONS**

**Option 1: The Riverstone Leadership Blog**

As a result of signing up for our list, you’ll receive updates when we post new material each week. We include practical tools and tips for leaders on an array of practical business topics. These posts will help you continue to grow your business.

**Option 2: Your Leadership Story Podcast**

We publish new episodes each week of Your Leadership Story, interviews with leaders for leaders. We believe that nothing important happens until someone leads. That’s why we bring you interesting and actionable ideas each week in our podcast that you can put to work immediately on the front lines of your business, organization, non-profit, or ministry.
PAID OPTIONS

Option 1: A Four-Session Coaching Package on Your Compelling Business Story

In four 50-minute phone or Skype coaching sessions, we will help you work through your specific business story, helping you if you get stuck and pointing you in the right direction to create your story and put it to work in your business.

Option 2: On-Site Consulting

We work with large and small organizations in strategy, organization, business, and leadership development. Often, a one or two-day consulting engagement can accelerate your progress dramatically.

Option 3: Keynote Speaking or Training Events

If you’re looking for speakers for your organization’s events, we would love to talk with you. We enjoy presenting practical leadership principles with humor and take-away impact.

Option 4: A Riverstone Mastermind or Advisory Boards

We offer several options to gather business leaders from non-competing but complimentary businesses in small group sessions to solve problems and provide accountability in a context of encouragement.

MORE INFORMATION?

If any of these options interest you, you can find out more at www.theriverstonegroup.com.