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# The shortest distance between two people is a story: Storytelling best practices in digital and social media marketing

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**Abstract** A well-told story engages people in experiences that are shared, even if the story is simply being recounted by a third-party. Simply put, stories bring people together. This article draws on the author's experience of having his heart kick-started to illustrate how, as marketers, the ability to tell meaningful and captivating stories can make the difference between success and failure.

**KEYWORDS:** storytelling, marketing, healthcare, people, stories

## INTRODUCTION

'You want to shove WHAT down my throat while I'm awake?' I asked my doctor, more loudly than intended. Just a few minutes earlier I had been officially diagnosed with atrial fibrillation, or an abnormal heart rhythm. The shape of my heart was irregular, one of my heart valves was not closing properly and the muscle was weak. What was worse, however, was that I was at an increased risk of a blood clot forming in my heart, breaking loose, making its way to my brain and causing a stroke. The solution to fixing my heart was for me to swallow a long, pinkie-sized tube, while coherent and talking, so the doctor could look at my heart to make sure there were no clots in it. If my

heart was clot-free, I would be fully sedated before having electricity shot through my chest to shock my heart back into rhythm. I was scared. I had a lot of questions before my procedure the following day.

But that is only the first part of my story. I went online to do some research about my upcoming transoesophageal echocardiogram (tube down the throat), or TEE, with subsequent cardioversion (electric shock to the heart). My worries were not calmed — on credible medical websites I was able to find only facts and scientific information about the procedure, while some of the videos I found on YouTube just made me even more nervous. There was a distinct lack of patient stories about the procedure to help

me understand what to expect. So I put my trust in the doctors and the recommended procedure. I arrived at the hospital the following morning and left hours later with a heart in rhythm.

A year and a half later, I was in the same boat — my heart was out of rhythm and I needed another TEE and cardioversion. I thought, ‘What better way to market Intermountain Healthcare and treatments for atrial fibrillation than by sharing my story publicly?’ I also knew that sharing my story could help others know the procedure is not as scary as it sounds — or as freaky as YouTube might suggest.

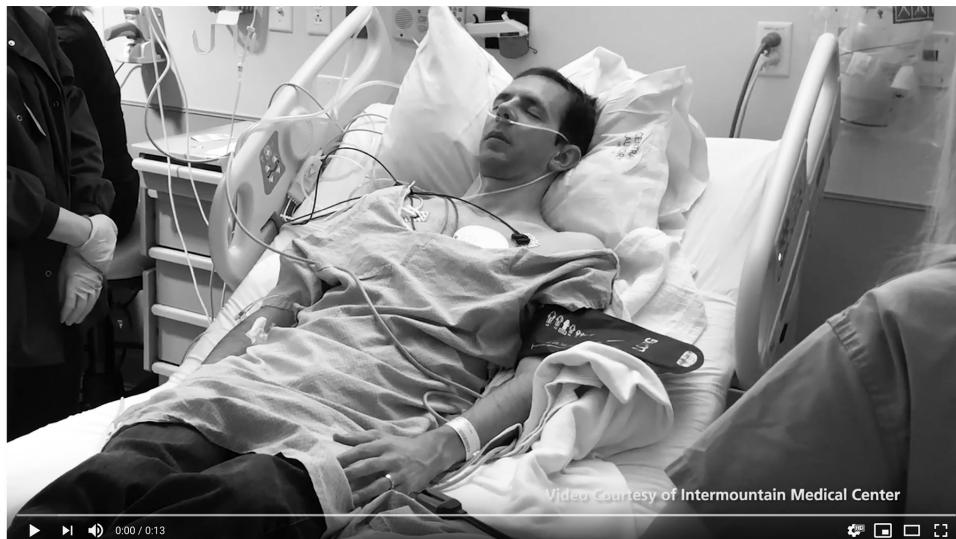
As I worked as a social media manager for Intermountain Healthcare at the time, I arranged for my procedure to be shared live on Twitter. The emotions and thoughts I had as a patient were shared in real time via my personal Twitter account (@jasonmcarlton). My colleague reported on the medical aspects of the procedure from the hospital’s Twitter account (@IntermtnMedCtr). The live tweeting included a 14-second video of the actual cardioversion, which was later posted to Intermountain Medical Center’s

YouTube channel<sup>1</sup> (Figure 1). That video has since grown to be the fourth most popular video on the channel. Before discussing what made the live-tweeting of my procedure successful, however, it is important to take a step back and understand the foundation of ‘why storytelling?’.

### WHY STORYTELLING?

Why did I choose to begin this article with a shocking story about my heart? I could have started by sharing facts and figures about storytelling in digital and social media marketing, or maybe even provided a few pie charts that highlight the benefits of storytelling. The reason is simple: ‘People understand and remember data wrapped in stories. So, whether you’re using stories to teach a course, inspire a team, make a sale or get a promotion, showcasing your point through a story will power it up’.<sup>2</sup> A story can draw people in. A story can help the listener or reader relate to the person who is telling the story.

In the book, ‘Master Storytelling’, the authors explain:



**Figure 1:** Video of Jason’s cardioversion (shock to the heart) as seen on the Intermountain Medical Center YouTube channel

‘When you tell a story with a plotline and characters that I can relate to, I respond on multiple levels. Not only do I understand what you’re telling me (cognitive level), I place myself within your story and feel it (emotional level). I access my own storehouse of experiences and my mirror neurons make your story mine, pretty vividly, if not literally ... When we own it, it tends to move us. That’s why stories grab us so tightly.’<sup>3</sup>

As Patti Dingsh said, ‘The shortest distance between two people is a story’. When you think of a colleague, client or family member, do you remember the facts and figures about them — their hair colour, height, age? Possibly, but likely not to the same degree that you remember the stories and experiences you have shared with each other.

The same concept applies to marketing in the digital and social media space. A tweet filled with facts, text, figures and data is unlikely to make the reader stop scrolling through their feed. By contrast, a visual of something they can relate to — a friend visiting a far-off place, a gif of a 1980s movie character, or a video of 200 joules of electricity being sent into someone’s chest to shock their heart back into rhythm — will likely give them pause. When you do not have 1,000 words to tell a story, sharing a picture is the simplest way to tell it.

In the words of Steve Jobs, the chairman, CEO and co-founder of Apple, Inc: ‘The most powerful person in the world is the storyteller. The storyteller sets the vision, values and agenda of an entire generation that is to come’.<sup>4</sup> In the world of digital and social media marketing, power lies in the ability to tell a story. ‘Data can persuade people, but it does not inspire them to act; to do that, you need to wrap your vision in a story that frees the imagination and stirs the soul’.<sup>5</sup>

### WHAT MAKES A GREAT STORY?

Steven Spielberg is one of the greatest storytellers of our time. He chose film as his

medium, and captured audiences with his stories — E.T., Jaws, Schindler’s List, Jurassic Park, Saving Private Ryan, and many more. ‘Storytelling is the most important aspect of anything I’ve ever done. It’s how the story is told — that’s all I’ve really focused on. If something doesn’t tell a story or if it’s confusing, I either don’t shoot it or I cut it out’.<sup>6</sup>

What do you consider a story? Consider this: I woke up this morning, went to work, returned home and went to bed. That is a story right there, and probably one many people can relate to. But is it a story that draws people in and allows people to relate to me as the storyteller? Our English teachers may have taught us that a story needs a beginning, a middle and an end, but a great story needs much more.

According to the author Jerry Borrowman,<sup>7</sup> a great story must:

- raise curiosity;
- create suspense;
- involve conflict (a moral issue or solving a problem);
- resolve the problem in unexpected ways that relieve tension (people like resolution);
- be believable; and
- be relevant.

Numerous authors have laid out the ingredients they feel are required for a story to draw in the reader or listener. For example, according to Nancy E. Krulik, the author of more than 200 books for children and young adults, including three *New York Times* bestsellers, the ‘five essential elements of a story’<sup>8</sup> are: characters, setting, plot, conflict and resolution.

Digital and social media marketers do not have the length of a novel to tell their organisation’s story, product or goals. They have only a matter of seconds before the listener decides whether or not to engage in their content. As Leo Gossage wisely said, ‘Nobody reads advertising. People read what

interests them, and sometimes it's an ad'.<sup>9</sup> But one fact remains: a story increases the odds of your information being digested. A well-told story can do even more. 'Well-told stories trigger emotions in our audience and chemically change them. Stories transform bland bullet points into moments of meaning and motivation. Stories make our data dynamic and move our audience to action'.<sup>10</sup>

## HOW TO TELL A STORY

A well-told story does not have to use words. In Disney's movie, 'Up', a tale of true love is shared in fewer than five minutes without using a single word. A young introverted boy meets an outgoing young girl. They marry, at which time dialogue goes by the wayside, and visual snippets of them experiencing life together — sharing joys, tragedy and heartache — sets the premise for the whole movie. It's a great example of how to show, not tell, a story.

At Intermountain Healthcare, Rich Nash is something of a local legend when it comes to writing. He managed the organisation's internal newsletter for several years, and when new employees join the marketing and communications team he shares with them his handout on storytelling. One section of the handout details how stories must:

- have an objective;
- start by telling the story, not telling about the story;
- share the right details, but not the wrong ones; and
- speaking of which, have a conclusion.

Audiences have short attention spans, so the third point shared here is crucial. The following paragraph provides an excellent example of Rich's guidance:

'My great-grandfather used to say to his wife, my great-grandmother, who in turn told her daughter, my grandmother, who repeated it to her daughter, my mother, who used to remind her daughter, my own

sister, that to talk well and eloquently was a very great art, but that an equally great one was to know the right moment to stop'.

Although Rich focuses primarily on the written word, his four storytelling tips apply to other channels of communication too. A story in a tweet must be succinct — with only 280 characters to play with, it has to be. A video on Facebook must be visually interesting — something more than a talking head. A blog article must have an opening paragraph that grabs the reader and draws them into the story. No matter the channel, if you include the wrong details — those that are not important to the progression of the story — the story will easily get lost.

## EXECUTING THE HEART-SHOCKING STORY

Now back to the story. After speaking with my doctor, a few days after I ran the 5 km race that kicked my heart out of rhythm, we decided I would receive my second cardioversion the following morning. A few minutes after that, I was standing in my colleague's office asking if she would be willing to live-tweet my medical procedure. I knew I was going to be sedated during the procedure, so I needed a second person. When she agreed, I checked with the medical staff who would be involved in the procedure to make sure they were comfortable with us sharing everything live on social media. The doctor, nurses, techs, etc were excited to be involved — they thought it would be fun, and they understood the educational opportunity it would provide to others who may one day have to experience the same procedure.

After getting the green light from everyone involved, we tapped into our network of social media influencers to encourage them to engage in the live event on Twitter. Relationships with these online influencers had developed while attending national heart conferences as part of the Intermountain Healthcare marketing team.

Our hospital regularly made the top 10 list of social media influencers at these conferences. As I knew many of the influencers personally, I sent them a direct message on Twitter and invited them to follow along.

The stage was set. The character had been identified. The plot was introduced. The conflict would occur the following morning with the hope of a resolution. All the elements of a good story were laid out, and when the morning arrived, the play button on the story was pressed.

I described the day in an article I published on the Intermountain Healthcare blog network roughly two months after sharing my experience live on Twitter (Figure 2). In the article, I shared the anxiety that kept me up at night, not knowing if my abnormal heart rhythm would be the death of me. Despite being young and healthy, I still worry my heart will jump out of rhythm at a moment's notice. The article also describes more about the day my procedure was shared live on Twitter. It reads:

'After checking in at the front desk, I was taken to an exam room and put on a hospital gown. I had monitors placed on my chest to follow my heart rate and they took my blood pressure as well. My BP was 115 over 93 and my heart rate was ranging from 110 to 140+ beats per minute, compared with a normal heart rate of 60 to 100.

The next part of the prep work definitely took me out of my comfort zone. I wasn't a fan of showing the world my chest, let alone having a strip of chest hair shaved off so the cardioversion pad could be positioned. But it was just part of the process. When the teams began to assemble in my room, things started moving pretty fast.

After a brief conversation with cardiovascular electrophysiologist Jeffrey Osborn, MD, he got the process started by giving me some lidocaine to gargle, swish, and swallow. That helped numb my throat for the TEE. The taste wasn't bad — but it wasn't good either. At the same time, fluids were hooked up to my IV and medications were started to help sedate me for the procedure.

The last thing I remember was the doctor asking me to lay on my left side and a nurse placing a pillow behind me to help keep me on my side. I started to feel a little sleepy and shut my eyes, and when I opened them, almost everyone had left the room and my heart rate was hovering around a consistent 90 beats per minute. I was told the TEE was a success, and after sharing a tweet from my personal account that everything went well, Dr Osborn replied to my tweet: "One shock, that's all to restore rhythm to normal".<sup>11</sup>

In the hours following the procedure, multiple heart experts and social media



**Figure 2:** Jason Carlton shares his thoughts and emotions live on Twitter before having his heart shocked back to a normal rhythm

influencers throughout the country chimed in on Twitter. John P. Erwin III, MD (@HeartOTexasMD), a cardiologist at Baylor Scott and White Health in Temple, Texas, responded, ‘I hope my friends at @IntermtnMedCtr don’t mind that I compiled these [tweets] to make them easier to follow and to use as education for patients? Thanks for live tweeting your #cvTEE Guided #Cardioversion for #Afib’ (Figure 3).

Debbe McCall (@DebbeMcCall), a cardiovascular patient researcher and advocate, replied to one of the final tweets in the story: ‘Thank you for being willing to share this video! Too many #afib patients see terrifying vids online. This will help so many of us’. A few weeks later, Debbe sent me a message on Twitter: ‘Thank you again for your cardioversion video. I’m going to add a little preface and put it on my AFib patient forum. I’ve run it past my admin team and we all agree this is SO much better than the terrifying and fake YouTube videos. You’ve done a wonderful thing for frightened AFib patients’.

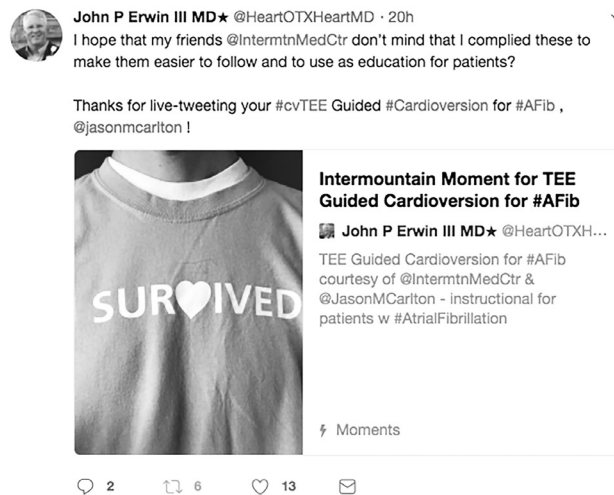
As of early 2020, the 14-second video has been viewed more than 44,000 times. The blog article has 29,683 page views with

26,786 unique page views. In comparing this article with other articles published during the same month (February 2018), it has had four times as many page views. Most of the traffic to the article has been from online search engines (roughly 90 per cent), with social channels (Facebook and Twitter) accounting for less than 2 per cent of traffic referrals (Figure 4).

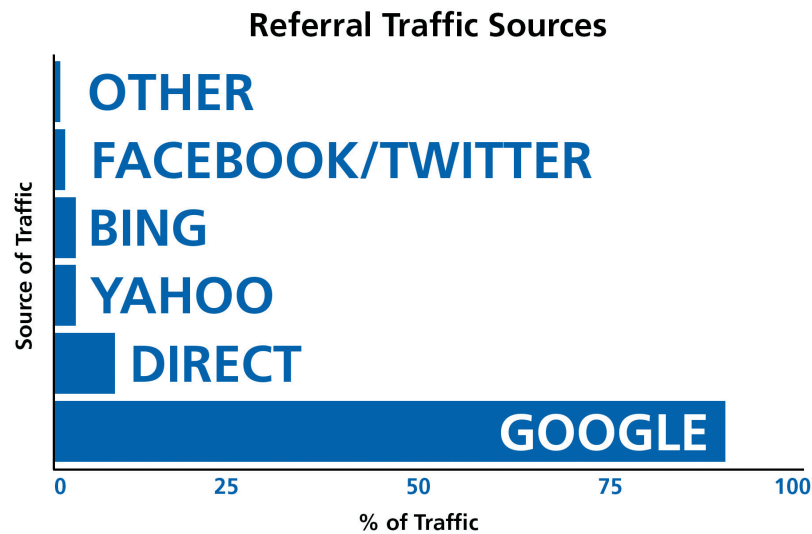
## HOW TO FIND A STORY

The case study above highlights a story told within the healthcare industry. Powerful stories that help bring understanding to complex procedures are not exclusive to healthcare. Every company has stories that can be told—from the front-line employee to the chief executive.

Although the above example came together overnight—literally—it was part of Intermountain Healthcare’s social media strategy to share stories that position the company as a leader in the cardiovascular space. The ability to share this story as it unfolded (ie live tweeting the procedure) was unique, but opportunities to share stories exist in almost any industry.



**Figure 3:** John Erwin III, MD, shares tweets from the live TEE and cardioversion procedure to educate his patients in Texas



**Figure 4:** Online traffic sources to ‘Shocking the heart back into rhythm isn’t as shocking as it sounds’ article.

Here are some tips to help identify and capture stories within an organisation:

- Encourage leaders to be on the lookout for stories within the organisation.
- Open the door for all employees — frontline, managers, C-suite — to e-mail potential stories to the marketing department. Setup an e-mail address: [stories@yourcompany.com](mailto:stories@yourcompany.com).
- Invite customers to provide feedback on their experiences with the organisation.
- Organise a social media campaign to encourage people (customers and employees) to share their stories — engage employees in this effort, as they are the best brand ambassadors.
- Get the marketing department out of their office to round with customers and employees. Those conversations will surface great stories.

Finding a story still in progress provides a unique opportunity to follow, capture and share the story in real time — much like my cardioversion procedure. A story that has already concluded can still be rich with the elements of a great story. It just needs to be told retrospectively.

## CONCLUSION

Twitter may be limited in the number of characters you can use, but that did not stop us from sharing a story. We also did not stick to sharing the story on just one channel. The procedure was shared live on Twitter, the video of the cardioversion was posted to YouTube and a first-person account of the experience (with embedded video) was added to the Intermountain Healthcare Blog Network.

Stories can be shaped to work on just about any digital or social media platform. The key is to know why storytelling works, what makes a story worth telling and how to tell that story using the right communications channel to reach the intended audience.

Actor Alan Alda sums it up well, ‘We listen better to a story. We get involved when we hear a story’.<sup>12</sup> Tell your story. Engage your audience. See results.

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