

# PRESIDENT'S LETTER

## What's Your Story?

*I'm often fascinated by how my own thought processes seem to come together. For no apparent reason a thought, or commonality of thoughts, will slowly start to emerge from multiple sources around me – perhaps from a conversation; maybe a media story; an event I attend. It could be anything, really, until they all cause me to center on a given train of thought – a story – that I can share with all of you.*



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I have been noticing lately many references to the power of stories. At the Academy Awards, more than one recipient noted in their acceptance speeches that the secret behind a successful movie is how well you tell your story. In the movie *Argo*, the lives and freedom of the U.S. diplomats held in Iran were dependent on how well they told their carefully-crafted stories. The media regularly makes reference to "a story you won't quickly forget" and we have all heard the old adage, "a story for the ages."

My son was exploring the world of Disney Imagineering and I noticed their emphasis that they always "start with a story." Whether they are crafting a new ride; a theme park; a movie; a book; they always start with a story to be told and use their medium to take their target audiences logically through that story. If there is a point to be made; a lesson to be taught; or an action to be influenced; it all starts with a story.

Further and scientifically underlining this 'power of the story,' a good friend and Master Storyteller – Kendall Haven ([www.KendallHaven.com](http://www.KendallHaven.com)) – former rocket scientist (really) turned professional 'story-engineer,' recently sent me an email telling me about his latest project. The advanced science research arm of the U.S. Department of Defense (DARPA) is doing a multi-year "Narrative Networks" research project with the belief that telling the right story might save both bullets and lives.

The study is based upon understanding how stories spread and amplify influence. Kendall explains it further as follows: "A company commander in Afghanistan might use a story format to communicate to a village elder, and

to understand the stories that come from the elders. It will help them tell if they are effectively communicating with the local population or not."

Analysts can evaluate stories that are circulating in a local population through social media, lectures and religious leaders. By observing the way their stories are structured, analysts may also be able to determine, years in advance, whether a population is becoming radicalized and to possibly intervene with stories of their own, told the right way, in order to prevent an escalating crisis.

Stories, like festivals and events, have been used throughout history to bring people together around the world. All of us use them every day to communicate with friends, family and business associates. How many times have you started a meeting or a telephone call with a story to get everyone focused or to set the tone? As Kendall has taught me, and I watch as many others all-around me clearly practice as well, applying the 'science of story' is the key to the art of effective communication for anyone who needs to inform, inspire, or educate.

That noted, I would guess that most of us do not spend the amount of time that we should on crafting or presenting 'our story' – personal or organizational. You don't have to be an Oscar-nominated film director or a Disney Imagineer to use the power of the story. Gather your staff, board and key volunteers together and determine/outline your most important storylines.

What is the story of your festival or event that you want to convey to your attendees; sponsors; city officials; media; or volunteers? You can have as many pathways and endings as you like, depending upon your audience(s). For city officials you may want to craft a story of a community working

together; of an important community business that brings powerful economic impact to the city; a story where your event is the hero.

To sponsors you will want to craft a story that places them at the heart of an event where the hero (their company) brings positive benefits to the community; is seen in a positive light by all those attending; receives accolades from important city officials and other business partners; provides quality-of-life and volunteer involvement opportunities to their employees; increases sales of products and services to attendees; and everyone lives happily-ever-after.

For attendees, your story will center around the experience that you want them to have at/with your event... from beginning to end...and all of the elements that will make that story come true. It may be a different story for young children, for adults, for those with disabilities, et al. And your personal story – vs. organizational – is every bit as important as any crafted for your event.

Anyway, you get the idea. If you can craft your stories and create a 'story-board' for each of your critical audiences, then you can use that story as a blueprint to effectively sell your event; build your event; and market your event. Every proposal, every power-point, every presentation should begin with a story, with a logical beginning, middle and end. Each story will determine whether you leave them with a warm memory, a call-to-action, or something in-between. Whatever it is, you should carefully craft your story to resonate with the personal brand, qualities and image that you want your hero to have.

So, what's your story?