

THE **4** MOST EFFECTIVE STORYSELLING™ PLOTS

CHOOSING YOUR NARRATIVE

FROM THE EMMY AWARD WINNING DIRECTOR AND EMMY NOMINATED PRODUCER



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NICK NANTON, ESQ

JW DICKS, ESQ

So this young actor was down to his last dime. Although he had gotten a few decent roles in movies, he still wasn't making the rent. He had hocked his wife's jewelry and even acted in a soft-core porn movie in a desperate attempt to stay afloat while he worked on his career.

But now he had an idea for a movie - a great movie. He was determined to write the screenplay. He knew it would turn things around. First, however, he needed a few bucks. He went out on the street and sold his dog. It was about all he had left and he only got fifty bucks for it.

He returned to his crummy apartment and kept typing for over 24 hours straight - not stopping until he had finished the script. He knew a producing team that liked him and would read it when it was done - so he wanted to waste no time. He hurried over to their offices with the pages.

They read it. And they went crazy over it. They offered him over a hundred thousand dollars for it - more money than he had ever seen in his life.

And he said, "Fine...as long as I play the lead."

The producers looked at him like he was nuts. Was this guy serious? He was a nobody. They couldn't make him the star.

But he wouldn't budge.

Meanwhile, the producers showed the script to a couple of studios to make sure it was commercial. The studios loved it too - and they wanted to make it, as long as an established star played the lead. They passed it around - some of the biggest superstars at the time expressed interest. The producers went back to the actor and said, "Look, Paul Newman wants to be in this thing. We'll up the price. You can be in the next thing you write. But sell *this* one to us now."

The actor, who wasn't quite sure where his next meal was coming from, again refused. Either he played the lead - or he didn't sell.

Finally, the producers backed down. They loved the script too much - and they decided they could make the movie for a low enough budget that they could at least make their money back. They made the deal - the actor starred in the movie - and the film's success took the world by storm.

If you haven't guessed by now, the movie was *Rocky* and the actor was Sylvester Stallone. Tony Robbins, among other motivational speakers, has used this story over and over again to demonstrate the power of positive thinking and why you have to commit yourself to your goals. Stallone's struggle to realize his dreams was an inspiration to everyone who heard it.

Only one problem with all this...*the story is almost completely fabricated.*

When the first "Rocky" film was released way back in 1976, the above saga of Stallone's difficulties was a major part of the movie's publicity campaign. In every interview regarding the film, Stallone and the producers would dutifully recite it in convincing detail; Rocky, the story of a down and out underdog boxer, was seen as an amazing parallel to Stallone's actual life.

And nobody questioned it - until thirty years later, when Gabe Sumner, then marketing director of United Artists, spilled the beans (and the producers and other studio execs confirmed his story). Stallone, in reality, was a working actor who had never insisted on playing the title part in his screenplay; however, the producers had a deal that allowed them to make any movie with a budget of less than a million dollars, and *Rocky* fit the bill. Why not put the guy in the lead? They had little to lose and couldn't afford a real star.

And, even though they thought the finished film was a knockout, they knew selling *Rocky* to the movie-going public was going to be an uphill battle and that they needed a gimmick. Having Stallone present the film to critics with his own trumped-up story was that gimmick. For that story to work, however, it had to be effective and had to resonate with the audience - which it did, big time. As Sumner said of the effort, "I don't have to tell you how the

press feeds on the underdog story...they ate up the idea that this actor loved his work so much...It all became part of the underdog fabric that brought people in. Period. *They just totally bought into it.*²¹ (Italics are ours.)

Now - wouldn't it be great to have people buy into *you* with the same level of enthusiasm? Without you having to make up a story?

It can be done. In this chapter, we're going to look at some specific StorySelling™ plotlines the Italian Stallion's handlers keyed into that made his publicity campaign a champ – and how you can make them work for you.

THE GREAT BASIC PLOTS OF LITERATURE

In the last chapter, we explained “The Ultimate Story” – the narrative that all of mankind's major myths, legends and stories follow. Now, as we mentioned then, that narrative is a little too long and complex for most StorySelling™ purposes. That's why we are now going to break down that Ultimate Story into *smaller* plotlines that still have the same kind of primal power in terms of its impact on people – and can also be more easily utilized for Celebrity Branding.

We're going to begin that process by discussing the stories described by author Christopher Booker in his book, *Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories*. Booker went beyond just myths and analyzed the most memorable literature, as well as movies and TV shows, to uncover the seven plots that were most frequently employed to the greatest success with readers and audiences.

Those seven plots are as follows:

1) Overcoming the Monster

The “Overcoming the Monster” plotline is pretty simple - the hero discovers something evil

threatening his homeland and must go out and conquer it. This covers anything from a knight going out to slay a dragon to James Bond going after Goldfinger.

2) Rags to Riches

In the late 19th century, the American writer Horatio Alger made a career out of this plot, with a series of novels about young boys born into poverty and achieving amazing success. It's still a hugely popular storyline in this country, if not THE most popular. Such modern mega-celebrities as Oprah Winfrey remain a source of fascination precisely because of their journey from incredibly humble roots.

3) The Quest

In The Quest, the hero must leave behind everyday life and go out and seek an object, person, location or just some information that's vital to his or his community's future.

The Lord of the Rings trilogy and the Indiana Jones movies both exemplify this time-honored storyline.

4) The Voyage

In “The Voyage,” the hero finds himself sent to a magical place, where everyday rules are no longer in play. At first, the trip is fun until something dark makes itself known, which the hero must conquer. In the process, he or she overcomes some internal problem, and then returns home. Prime examples of this plot are *The Wizard of Oz* and *Gulliver's Travels*, and even the children's classic, *Where the Wild Things Are*. More modern examples would be *Inception* and even *The Devil Wears Prada*.

5) Comedy

This is a pretty obvious category. We've all seen enough comedies to know they're usually

¹ Alex Ben Block, “The Untold Story: ‘Rocky’ Underdog Origin a Studio Myth,” *Hollywood Today*, December 20th, 2006

about situations that are...well, funny; big misunderstandings or people out of their element trying to pull something off they shouldn't try to attempt or pretending to be something they're not. Think of Woody Allen in his early films faking it as a ladies' man, or, more recently, Will Ferrell being the buffoon in any number of scenarios (half of an ice skating team in *Blades of Glory*, an egotistical newscaster in *Anchorman*, etc.).

6) Tragedy

Tragedy, of course, is the other side of comedy - it's all about the unhappy ending and involves very bad things happening to the protagonist, frequently including his or her death. Shakespeare was big on tragedy - *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* are all plays where pretty much everybody we like dies. These days, movies like *Scarface* and *Goodfellas* serve as our modern-day tragedies.

7) Rebirth

Rebirth is the storyline that snatches triumph from the jaws of the tragic defeat. It's Ebenezer Scrooge buying the Cratchit family a turkey on Christmas morning in *A Christmas Carol*, it's the town of Bedford Falls giving Jimmy Stewart the money he needs at the end of *It's a Wonderful Life*, and of course, in the most epic (and in our opinion the most significant!) of all rebirths, it's Jesus rising up on Easter morning in The Bible. Rebirth is the overcoming of overwhelming negative events or conditions in a way that gives the viewer or reader hope and inspiration.

Now, you may have noticed that we just described *seven* Basic Plots – but the title of this chapter only refers to *four* StorySelling™ Plots. That's because two of these plots don't always work the way we'd like them to for overall StorySelling™ – while two other plots, we believe, should be combined into one.

We'll start with the two plots that don't always work for StorySelling™: *Comedy* and *Tragedy*. When you're

done telling your brand story, do you really want to leave your audience laughing at you – or feeling sorry for you? Not really.

A personal brand, especially one linked to your business, has to create reasons to buy from you – or, at the very least, motivate someone to want to pursue a professional relationship with you on some level. Neither Comedy nor Tragedy really can accomplish that in a meaningful way.

However, there is no denying that you can use *elements* of these two plots in your branding; we routinely do just that in the branding films we make for our clients. There's nothing wrong with delivering a laugh or a tear *along the way* – it just shouldn't be your end destination.

Similarly, both can be used to burnish an already-existing Celebrity Brand. It's quite all right for Donald Trump to be the center of a Comedy Central Comedy Roast – his brand easily accommodates that. Many a celebrity has also used Tragedy to seize the spotlight – how many *People* magazine cover stories have you seen where a star admits to a drug addiction or discusses a horrifying personal situation “for the first time?”

Again, however, these are cases where the Celebrity Brand is already firmly in place and can get a boost from these StorySelling™ detours.

Finally, the two plots that we believe should be combined are The Quest and The Voyage. That's because, again, you must look at the endgame of any StorySelling™ plotline; The Voyage doesn't quite have one, unless it's combined with a Quest. In other words, if your StorySelling™ involves you entering a strange new world, you should be entering that strange new world *for a reason*.

THE FINAL FOUR

Here, then, are what we consider to be the four most effective StorySelling™ Plots:

- 1) **Overcoming the Monster**
- 2) **Rags to Riches**
- 3) **The Quest**
- 4) **Rebirth**

Now, let's delve into this Final Four in more detail to show how Stallone capitalized on them - and how you can too.

StorySelling™ Plot #1: Overcoming the Monster

How Stallone used it: In Stallone's StorySelling™ scenario, the monster he overcame was Hollywood itself – the massive entertainment industry was not going to let a virtual unknown star in a film and damage its box office fortunes. He set up a true David vs. Goliath confrontation that he, improbably, won

– and which would make the public root for Stallone, just as if he had “gone the distance” in the ring with the heavyweight champion, as his character Rocky did in the movie.

How you can use it: How might this plot pertain to your Celebrity Brand? Simple. There are plenty of “monsters” that your potential clients and customers want to see destroyed - it's just a matter of identifying the ones that fit into your profession or life story. Perhaps you took on the establishment in some significant way to come out on top – for example, if you're a tax lawyer, you may have won a huge case against the IRS' mammoth bureaucracy. Or you're a financial advisor who saw what the crash of 2008 (another “monster”) did to innocent people - and you set out to build an investment strategy that safeguards against that happening. There are many ways to go with this plotline that would pay off for any business.

StorySelling™ Plot #2: Rags to Riches

How Stallone used it: It's very easy to see how the manufactured Stallone story keyed into this attractive narrative

– the publicity machine portrayed him as being so broke that he had to sell his dog! Not only that, but he was also portrayed as rejecting a six figure payday to hang on to his dream – which made his success story all the more sweet to the audience.

How you can use it: This is perhaps the easiest plot to translate to StorySelling™, since it's such a universal experience. Most entrepreneurs started with virtually nothing and built their businesses from scratch – and they have plenty of stories to illustrate that point. Even if you come from well-off circumstances, you probably still have stories of the difficulties in beginning your business. For example, our Emmy-nominated branded film, “Car Men,” spotlighted car dealer Tracy Myers, whose dad owned his car lot before him. If you think there's not much of a Rags-to-Riches quality to that, you're wrong – because his dad made him start at the bottom, washing cars, and work his way up just like any other newbie.

StorySelling™ Plot #3: The Quest

How Stallone used it: Stallone's quest was obvious – he not only wanted to sell his screenplay, he wanted to star in the movie as well. In the StorySelling™ narrative, he was portrayed as facing numerous incredible obstacles in his struggle to succeed at his Quest. When anyone is in pursuit of a dream, and is willing to face all kinds of hardship to reach that goal, we identify with that person and want a happy ending; we root for his or her success.

How you can use it: First ask yourself, did you

undergo a quest of your own to find something unique and special to add to your business? We know personal development experts, for example, who promote the fact that they traveled the world to discover the most innovative and effective meditation techniques. If you had to search for the perfect location or the most powerful product or service to sell, or even just to be the best at what you do, that could be your version of The Quest. Understanding what you went through to find what is most vital about what you do also gives an appreciation of that process, as well as an appreciation of the value of your business. That creates a desire in consumers to *buy* this wonderful “something.”

StorySelling™ Plot #4: Rebirth

How Stallone used it: The Stallone StorySelling™ effort pictured him as completely “dead” career-wise, after having had roles in several Hollywood movies – he wouldn’t sell his script unless he could star in it, so the movie industry was ready to completely turn its back on him, leaving him destitute and without any possibilities for a turnaround. When they finally agreed to his demand, and the movie went on to become an Oscar-winner, you could definitely say Stallone was reborn.

How you can use it: Look no further than the 2012 Super Bowl for a prime example of using the Rebirth paradigm to power up a brand. When Clint Eastwood walked down a dark alley to sell the comeback of Chrysler, it created such a powerful moment that the commercial became an instant political controversy. And it’s not the first time Chrysler pulled off the Rebirth trick to great effect - way back in the 1980’s, then-CEO Lee Iacocca promoted the brand in commercials after the car company came back from bankruptcy.

Rebirth is an amazing StorySelling™ plot if you’ve gone through tough times and made it back to success. You can see this plot in the Steve Jobs story we told in the last chapter – when he was fired from his own company, but came back bigger than ever. That kind of triumph inspires people and makes them want to listen to what you have to say. That’s why Rebirth is a powerful and potent plot to use for Celebrity Branding, when it fits your circumstances.

As you can see through the Sylvester Stallone example, you can use elements of *all four* of these basic plots in your StorySelling™, in addition to those of Comedy and Tragedy. The main thing to keep in mind is that at least *one* of these four plots should figure prominently in the story you tell – and provide the basic narrative on which you can hang the rest of your branding story. Simplicity is important, which is why we boiled all the plot points of The Ultimate Story down to this quartet.

And, by the way, all four of those plots share an important attribute that we believe is primarily responsible for their effectiveness in StorySelling™: They are all about *the overcoming of obstacles to achieve a rewarding conclusion*. Whether you’ve overcome the monster, working out of poverty to achieve wealth, leaping over all the hurdles that stand between you and the object of your Quest, or surviving sudden ruin to regain success, you are always *overcoming*. And you’re *always beating the odds*.

And *that act of overcoming* is what makes these four plots so universal and so appealing. Life is a constant battle in many ways, a battle that these four plots represent in different ways. When you’re honest about your struggles, your audience relates

– and when you triumph over them, your audience stands up and cheers...

...just like at the end of (what else?)...a *Rocky* movie!

If you would like us to help you tell your story – whether in your own Best-Selling Book, on major television media, or through your own personal documentary film – call 800.980.1626 today to speak with your Business Agent®.