

BRAND STORYTELLING

Elevate Your Organization's Story to Inspire Engagement and Invite Action

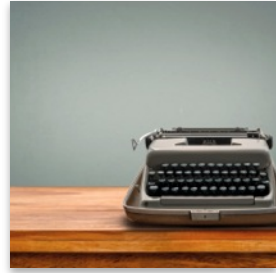
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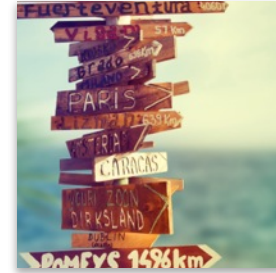
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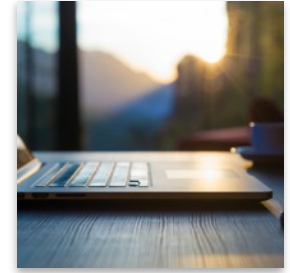
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“The only magic bullet in marketing is the wonder we create by the stories we tell. You have to make that story relevant to them. Invite their curiosity and leave them wanting to know more.”

The Power of Story

Whether gathering around a summer campfire, your grandparents' living room, or your friend's television, storytelling is the thread that connects us all.

Quite simply storytelling is in our DNA. Think about the best storytellers you've known. What is it about their stories that captivates you? Their humor? Sincerity? The way they bring you along and show—not just tell—you the adventure and action?

Contrary to our device-dependent nature of the 21st century, we don't even need a phone, tablet, or YouTube to tell these stories. All we need is our creativity and a common language. In fact, the best stories—the ones passed down from civilizations, cultures, and ancestors of long ago—have been crafted and told so well that illiterate generations could repeat them. Stories have the power to educate, challenge, and excite us.

Above all, great stories have the power to *move* us.



The Power of Story

The Storytelling Trance

Research has shown the power stories have over us is a real thing. Years ago, well before social media, Brian W. Strum shared insights about the “storylistening trance” in the *Journal of American Folklore*.¹ According to Strum’s research, people listening to stories, “enter a qualitatively different state of consciousness.”

Yet, for most organizations today, using stories—real, compelling stories that move us—goes completely against their corporate grains. Instead, most organizations today spend their budgets trying to differentiate, only to end up sounding similar to competitors within their industries. Their channels are full of

jargon and insider corporate speak. Then, many wonder why customers and prospects aren’t responding. And there’s one simple reason...

Your Story Is Your Brand

At the end of the day, your stories are your brand. Branding isn’t about what you think or what you say about yourself. Your brand is about what your audiences value—and *what they remember*.

That’s because we do not gather around the water cooler to talk about taglines or recite key messages. We gather around the water cooler to tell a story. Why? Because stories stick. Stories have great characters we can identify with who remind us of adventures we’ve had

(or want to have). Above all, stories have action. And whether we’re in a nonprofit, B2B, or B2C company, our only real goal as communicators is to create more action.

**Stories are
the most
powerful,
most enduring
form of
communication
we have.**

Understand Your Audiences

You Don't Want to Date Yourself!

When you really want to impress someone on a date, you carefully plan the evening, picking just the right restaurant and wine. But if you then ruin that evening by talking about yourself incessantly for the next three hours, chances are you won't have a second date. The whole point is to create a reciprocal exchange.

In the same way, when it comes to content, it's a continual practice to stop talking about how great you are and step into the shoes of your target audiences, current customers, and partners. Seek to understand what influences them, motivates them, worries them, and inspires them.

Define Your Audiences

Many organizations look to audience (or buyer) personas to drive content creation. Yet, categorizing audiences in these painstakingly detailed ways doesn't

always correlate to your core business structure. Most organizations need far too many personas to cover all their market areas and stakeholder groups.

That's why I take clients through an exercise to define the characteristics, needs, and pain points of their audiences that more closely align with their business.

These audiences include:

- ▶ **Foundational:** Your bread-and-butter clients and partners representing the core of your business.
- ▶ **Emerging:** A growing audience representing emerging lines of business or a shift in business focus into new areas or geographies.
- ▶ **Aspirational:** The audiences or market segments that you want to be going after in the next few years.

When you are writing from a corporate perspective, look to engage those audiences you identified in ways that

matter to them (not you). Certainly, many brands have come up with some great content campaigns over the years. But Coca-Cola is one brand that has mastered the art of storytelling. And this started years ago, well before the digital age.

I'll never forget watching with chills (and a little envy), as the [little boy consoled an injured Mean Joe Green](#) by handing him his Coca-Cola bottle in the breezeway of the football stadium. Today, Coke has amplified that heartfelt storytelling over countless channels in multiple languages around the world, focused on "refreshing the world one story at a time."

By becoming the go-to source of content that educates, inspires, and makes your audiences think, you become a trusted adviser and ultimately someone they would do business with.

Move Audiences to Action

Educating Minds, Engaging Hearts

As marketers, we are trained navel gazers. It's our job to look within our organizations and create the go-forward strategy to market our products, people, and services. In the midst of focusing so deeply inward, with our lingo and insider speak, we can become biased. We can sometimes lose sight of what it takes to connect with our audiences through objective, compelling storytelling.

The reason stories are so powerful is because they engage our hearts while opening, moving, and (hopefully) changing minds. However, you have to know at the outset which one will it be: do you seek to win mind share or heart share from your audiences?

Because you only get to engage one at a time, contends business

consultant Lisa Lai, in her Harvard Business Review article about the power of persuasion.² That's because, Lai explains, trying to win both hearts and minds simultaneously can actually dilute our message, making us less influential.

Winning hearts is more about evoking emotion, creating common ground, and sharing memorable stories, whereas capturing mind share is all about advocating for a choice, addressing complex issues, and presenting facts. Understanding how your audience makes decisions can help shape the flow of your content and the narrative of your story. Is it funny and emotional? Or is it practical and backed by data?

Regardless of how compelling your research or how pretty your spreadsheets, however, the heart will always win.

Emotions Drive Decisions

No matter how you slice or dice it, in the world of marketing, our goal is ultimately to create content that engages, educates, and moves audiences to action. When it comes down to return on investment, executive leadership is far more concerned about the latter: how can you convert browsers and readers to buyers and repeaters.



Researchers estimate 90% of all purchasing decisions are made subconsciously.³

Move Audiences to Action

Based on two decades' worth of research by University of Southern California neuroscience professor Antonio Damasio, all decisions will ultimately come down to emotion—no matter how logical they seem.⁴ In one of his breakthrough findings, Damasio studied people who seemed normal but had damage in the part of the brain where decisions are generated.

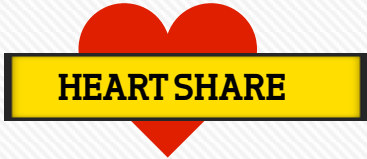
The subjects *knew* what steps needed to be taken in logical terms, but found it difficult to make even the simplest decisions because they lacked an emotional connection to that decision.

At an even more rudimentary level, I believe there's another reason why emotions will always win. Through years of study in personal development, I've found that each of us carries a core drive. While we each have different personal stories

that shape us, as humans we all seek to feel like rock stars.

Deep down want to be seen, heard, understood, and appreciated for who we are—and what we uniquely have to offer. So it's natural then that we want to make the discovery, arrive at the decision, or find the solution that will create a net win for our teams or organizations. We may use logic to narrow those choices but our desire to succeed—and be rewarded for that success—is always emotional.

That's why understanding what drives and influences your audiences can help you determine how to create the initial connection. You may use very fact-driven data or very heart-tugging anecdotes to hook in your audience—but then you must pay that off and create the right calls to action to inspire the next step.



when to use

introduce ideas | gain support | align with ideas/brands

how to capture

make it personal | use vivid descriptions | share stories

VS.



when to use

advocate for a choice | change direction | seek agreement

how to capture

create buy-in | provide data & expertise | share benefits & facts

“ The path to creating more meaning, more connection, and ultimately more action, is to stop thinking like a marketer and start acting like a storyteller. ”



The 3 R's of Storytelling

RIVETING EXPERIENCES

The best stories are the ones we can't put down and don't want to end.

Go behind the scenes within your organization to look for those very human stories. Look for the ones with conflict, complication, or challenge—the ones that have action and evoke emotion. And the ones that expose your humanity and, dare I say it, flaws. Share what happened, the lessons learned, and how you triumphed. These are the stories that have the power to change others.

In your brainstorming sessions, put on your reporter hat and think about the core questions that can evoke hidden gems of stories: *why, what, how, where, who, so what, and what happened next?*



The 3 R's of Storytelling

RICH CHARACTERS

You are not the hero of your story. Your customers, clients, and partners are the real heroes.

You are the sage, the teacher, and the cheerleader. In *Star Wars* terms, your customers are Luke Skywalker. You are Yoda.⁵ Your customers are multidimensional—as are the leaders and teams within your organization. We are whole people, not job titles. And the best stories have characters that are rich in personality and relatable in their experiences.

Learn to observe people, yes even your leaders, as characters. If you were writing a fictional character sketch about them, what would you notice? What makes them tick? What scares them? How do they speak? What mannerisms do they use?

Explore how to capture their quotes and describe them within situations to make them relatable—and you can do this while still building their credibility as leaders with a unique perspective in your industry.



Your Customers

You

6

The 3 R's of Storytelling

REPEATABLE & MEASURABLE

Pumping out content isn't necessarily difficult.

What's more challenging is churning out the stories that are worth sharing. Think about the stories you share most often—whether on your social channels or over happy hour. Are they packed with data and numbers or also laced with emotion and inspiration?

In the same way, you can use analytics tools, such as Google Analytics, Nuvi, or your social dashboards, to explore what types of content your audiences are sharing. Or better yet, ask them. Ask what they want to know from you.

At the end of the day, it's this action—of sharing, inquiring, or buying—we seek from our content. So if we're to maximize our content, we must also map out where we want our audiences to go—and ask them to take that step through the right calls to action.





“ The whole point of a story is to take your reader on an adventure. But like any good travel guide, you must first know where *you* are going. ”

The Storytelling Roadmap



01. Identify Your Story

What's your story?
Who are your characters?



Start Here!



02. Map Your Journey

Where are you going?
How will you get there?



03. Define Roles & Responsibilities

Who's helping you?



05. Share & Measure

How will you know
when you arrive?



Repeat Here!



04. Write Great Stories

How can you tell
your story better?



01. Identify Your Story

Clarify Your Unique Story

In the first step of the brand storytelling roadmap, you must identify your core story by developing a messaging framework. This is the story only you can tell. Because the way to stop sounding like everyone else in your industry is to let go of the jargon and speak in real terms. How? Get outside your walls and invite feedback from your core stakeholders.

For my clients, this has included everything from conducting online questionnaires and one-on-one conversations to small focus groups using Google Hangouts. I'll never forget at the end of one messaging project for [Zpryme](#), a market research firm in Austin. The client's eyebrows

knotted in thought, and yet his face shared a wide smile.

"I get it!" he declared emphatically. "Now I understand we were using all the wrong words before. I would have never described us in this way."

In thinking about your brand story—and the stories you tell to pay off that story, what words do your stakeholders use? Are they the same across stakeholder sets (customers, prospects, partners, influencers, government, etc.)? How do they describe your services? What is the unique value they perceive that only you bring?

From this insight, you can begin to craft a story that meets them where they are.



Quick Tip: The Pixar Pitch

According to story artist Emma Coats, every Pixar film shares a similar storytelling DNA.⁷ This compelling structure involves six sequential steps that can help you identify your brand story in just six sentences. The example below uses Pixar's *Finding Nemo*. (I've also added in a few thoughts to provide context.)

Once upon a time there was...a widowed fish named Marlin who was protective of his son, Nemo. (The current issue or state.)

Every day...Marlin warned Nemo of the ocean's dangers and not to venture too far. (The ongoing situation, as a threat or opportunity.)

Then one day...Nemo defies his father's warning and swims into the open water. (A turning point presented by the challenge or solution.)

Because of that...Nemo is captured by a diver and ends up in a dentist's fish tank in Sydney. (Challenge or solution #1.)

Because of that...Marlin sets off on a journey to find Nemo with the help of other sea creatures. (Challenge or solution #2.)

Until finally...Marlin and Nemo find each other, reunite and Nemo learns love requires trust. (The resolution/lesson/unique outcome).

Adapted from "The Working Differently Blog" by Joseph A. Connor



02. Map Your Journey

Follow the Hero's Journey

Every great story follows a similar story arc, that of the hero's journey. The late Joseph Campbell spent years studying this framework of the hero being called to embark on a new adventure, setting out on his course, enduring tests and challenges along the way, and returning to that "home" wiser. In content marketing terms, it's a similar path. We must identify two essential components: where are you going and how will you get there?

Where Are You Going?

Where are you being called? What's the destination or end goal of your content? Is it to drive sales of your new product in a single

campaign? Or is your goal to elevate multiple channels to elevate your overall brand? This is what you should consider the "why" of your content program. Knowing the final destination is what gives your content program purpose and meaning to focus your efforts. This could be growing your readership by 20 percent or adding five new qualified leads a month. Whatever your end goal, make it specific, impactful, and measurable.

How Will You Get There?

Now that you've identified where you want to go—the next step is mapping how you will get there. What steps will you take? And how will you monitor your progress? This is where you develop (or update) your core

content plan. Your content plan should outline the strategy of "what" you are doing and "how" you will do it.

I'm a big fan of keeping these plans simple, actionable, and accountable. At minimum, your strategic content plan should include the following elements:

- ▶ Identify your audiences (foundational, emerging and aspirational).
- ▶ Clarify your channels (blog, social, proprietary/marquee content, etc.).
- ▶ Define your content types (articles, video, infographics, white papers, etc.).
- ▶ Outline which key performance indicators (KPIs) and metrics you'll measure to monitor and evaluate success.





03. Define Roles & Responsibilities

Establish Your Teams

Far too often content programs struggle because there's little definition around roles, responsibilities, and accountabilities. That's why you must structure your content team more like a newsroom and less like a marketing department. That includes establishing a process for content creation, editing, and approvals. Investing in a content management system, such as [Gather Content](#), can help streamline your editorial workflow significantly.

For every channel, it's also imperative to assign roles. Think of these roles as you would departments or "beats" at a newspaper. Each person has specific scope of focus. By identifying these roles and responsibilities, you can empower creative authorship and establish accountability to the larger content strategy.

Content Team

	Company Blog	News / Newsletter	Website Management	Social Media	Proprietary Content (Video, white papers, etc.)
Owner					
Advisor					
Contributor					

Owners: Initiates and oversees all aspects of channel's success. This includes strategy, goals, content ideation and writing, measurement, and reporting. Manages content production from Contributors. Communicates regularly with Advisor and sets meetings for the content team.

Advisor: Supports Owner with channel strategy, goals, content ideation, and reporting. May also write content and edits/approves content prior to posting.

Contributors: Generate story ideas and responsible for content creation. May be part of core content team or may serve as liaisons from departments within the organization.



04. Write Great Stories

Your Words Matter Most

No matter how much time you spend writing the perfect content plan or invest in your website, there's simply no substitute for good writing. And this means writing for real people, and not just SEO keywords for Google.

In a world of eight-second attention spans (yes, that's now less than a goldfish), we must hook audiences quickly—and then keep them engaged. So how do we do that?

Beyond the earlier points about writing for them, not you, it means understanding each of us perceive and process information in different ways. Circling back to that idea of heart share versus mind

share, each of our readers comes to our content from a different perspective—usually with a specific question in mind that they want answered by us: *why, what, how, or so what.*

The way we perceive and process information directly impacts the beliefs we hold and actions we take. Therefore, it's critical to understand that the way they perceive your content blended with how you deliver it directly impacts their baseline awareness, deeper understanding and ultimately the actions they take. So let's take a deeper look at how to structure your content to invite engagement—and action.





04. Write Great Stories

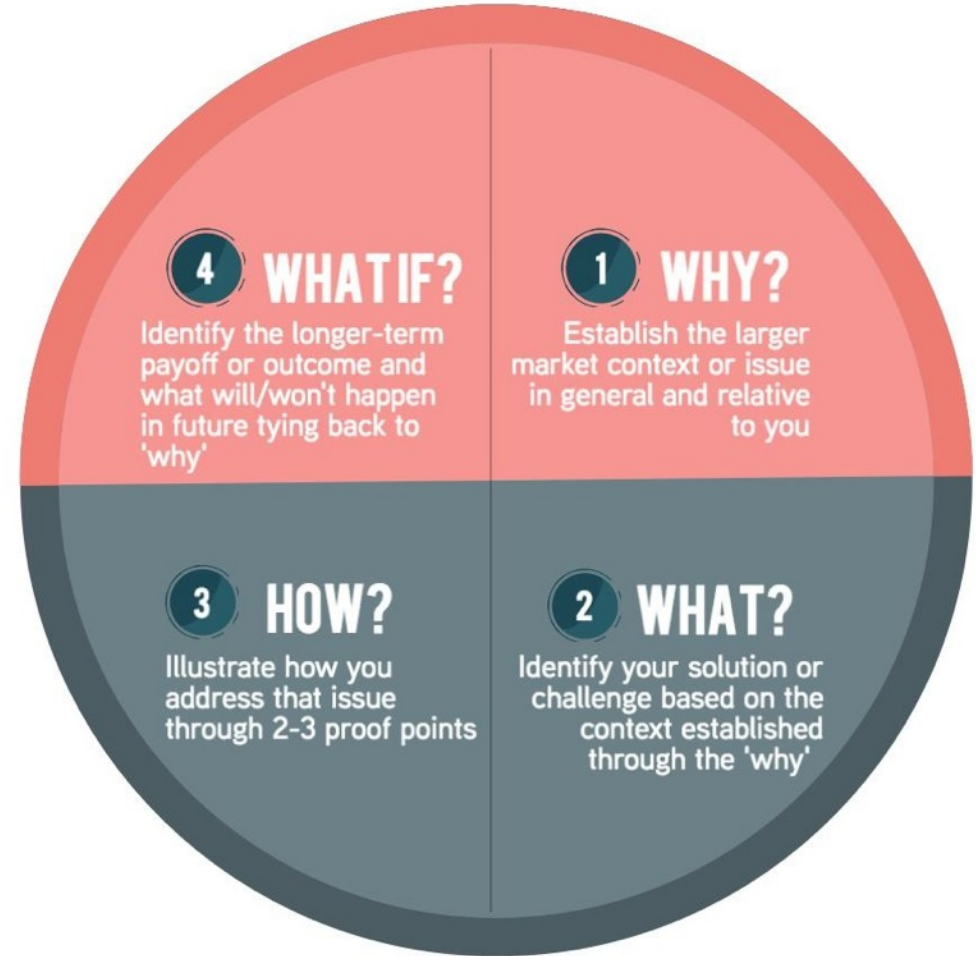
Identify Your Story Arc

In coaching writers over the years, I have invariably come back to the same core approach, time and time again. Following this *why > what > how > what if* structure works every time, particularly for longer format content (blogs, op-eds, white papers, etc.).

Why? Well, first because it addresses how your readers perceive and process information. And it ensures you reach your audience from mind share and heart share—ultimately with the intent of inspiring them to engage and take an action. Finally, by mapping your content in this structure, you won't get stuck writing for five paragraphs about 'why' your product is so great, when readers really want to know 'how' it can help them.

Whether your subject matter is terribly dry or includes people changing the world, you can still create this story arc. Find the kernel of what's different, what's unique, what problem is being solved or person is being helped. Take the reader on a journey to educate, inspire or simply inform.

It is critical, of course, to know the subject matter well—or have a great expert on hand to support you. But I have come to learn that you can write about most anything if you learn how to write well. That is, knowing how to research, ask good questions, and weave in stories and examples that bring home your points. Studying and practicing the craft of creative nonfiction and fiction writing can help. Take a [creative writing training course](#) or check out writing resources, such as [Writer's Digest](#), for prompts and ideas.





05. Share, Measure, Repeat

Share Where It Counts

When it comes to channels, there are now dozens upon dozens of options but the key is asking yourself: where are my target audiences?

Focus your time and energy on where your foundational and emerging audiences are first—along with building your destinations. Destinations are the places that you own and where you want to send traffic, such as your blog, website and deeper proprietary content.

Many often think of social media as a destination, but it's not. Social media, like your email newsletter, is a driver. These drivers are for sharing information and ultimately driving traffic to a destination where you can educate and convert them deeper within your sales channels—to sign up, buy, or give.

Measure Based on Content Type

I've found most content usually falls into one of two buckets: *brand-building content* or *sales-building content*. While these may overlap, the difference between brand-building and sales-building content is how you track the audience's journey.

For example, brand-building content (e.g., blogs, social posts, etc.) will likely have softer calls to action to visit a page or learn more. The goal with this content is creating initial or ongoing awareness, so your conversion points should measure things like overall site traffic, bounce rate, referral traffic, individual post/article performance and social engagement.

However, for sales-building content, the end goal is encouraging a more linear path of action (e.g., targeted drip

campaigns, sign-ups for whitepapers/videos or selling a product/service). Therefore, measurement becomes far more about creating a clear path for your calls to action, leading audiences more sequentially through your pre-defined steps or conversion points. This would include evaluating your specific traffic pipelines—everything from email open rates and click-throughs to conversion points on landing pages and tracking calls, signups, etc.

When it comes to your content program, aiming for good now is far better than perfect later.



05. Share, Measure, Repeat

Measure Consistently & Take Action

There is no one-size-fits-all solution to measurement. But no matter what approach you take, I cannot stress enough the importance of keeping it simple, consistent, and actionable.

If your commitment to measurement has been a bit haphazard, the place to start is identifying the data points you, and your leadership, care most about and commit to monitoring them regularly. I recommend monthly monitoring and reporting, with of course, specific reporting for any special campaigns not part of your typical production cycle. Quarterly reporting can also provide an effective snapshot of trends to watch over time.

Output vs. Outcome Goals

With my clients, I recommend starting the first year of your content measurement program with *output-based* goals as opposed to *outcome-based goals*. This means you establish measurement targets around output and production for each channel that you own and control. It's a slippery slope to start a measurement program setting targets for what your audiences do—or don't do. This is especially true if your content production has been erratic with a blog here and social post there, or you've had no production on a channel for quite some time.

For example, if updating your company blog has been inconsistent, then your first charge is to create a steady output

of content to reconnect with your audiences. Perhaps for you that's three blogs a month.

By approaching measurement in this way, you can get a clearer picture of how to refine your internal production process to hit, or exceed, your three blogs. Additionally, you now have enough content to fairly assess how readers engage and convert through your pipeline over time. From this insight derived from your output, you can then reevaluate your approach for the next year to begin focusing on outcome-based goals.

Keep in mind that when it comes to your content program, aiming for good now is far more effective than perfect later. Or as my old magazine editor used to shout from my office door while I pounded out my stories, "cut your losses and let it go." That said, pick a place to start and just begin.

Storytelling as a Practice

The Enduring Story

Just as we've been telling stories since the dawn of time, we will continue to use the power of storytelling to inspire and invite our audiences to connect with our brands.

But with shorter attention spans, ever-changing channels, and enhanced technology, it's up to us to explore how and where to tell those stories. In fact, your content program is a story in itself—it's an ongoing process of knowing your purpose, identifying your characters, mapping your journey, and measuring your effectiveness. And it's a journey that's unique to every organization, based on your audiences, needs, history, and perspective.

Your content program only works when your content works—when it

speaks to the hearts and minds of your audiences. And from this inspired space, they are more compelled to share, subscribe, or call.

Learning to identify, write, and share great stories is like any craft: it takes consistent practice. Whether you're developing content regularly or leading creative teams, cultivating this craft takes time, and of course, a supportive environment that encourages storytelling.

At the end of the day, when we're willing to look up from our navels and think beyond our walls, we come to discover we don't have to be Pulitzer Prize-winning writers. We just have to get out of our own way to tell a good story.



Quick Tip: Bust Creative Blocks

Feeling creatively blocked? One of my favorite simple exercises for when creative blocks happen (and they happen to all of us) is to play the 'what if game.' Here's what you do...

Simply Take 5 minutes out of your day to ask yourself a series of what-if questions. 'What if I win the lottery?' 'What if I bought a new car?' 'What if I went on a tropical vacation?'

The questions themselves don't matter. And the point isn't to answer them. The idea is to simply open that space within you that dreams, imagines, and remembers new possibilities.

Other helpful activities for unblocking creativity include: drawing, coloring, meditating, dancing, and physical activity. The key is to get out of your head and back into your heart and body to reconnect and reimagine!



“ A great story is one that continues to evolve and endure over time, regardless of how it's shared. ”

Meet Lara Zuehlke



Lara Zuehlke

Award-winning Writer | Content Director
Speaker & Trainer

For nearly two decades, Lara Zuehlke has wrangled those 26 letters of the alphabet in every way imaginable.

From magazine editorial and content strategy to integrated marketing and digital engagement, Lara understands how to identify the story and share it through every channel. Over the years, Lara has worked with organizations ranging from start-ups and nonprofits to private companies and Fortune 500 firms. Her client portfolio includes L'Oreal, Hewlett-Packard, Corner Bakery, car2go, Denham Capital, Kepner-Tregoe, Seton Healthcare Family, and many more. >> A true ENFJ (Extrovert, Intuitive, Feeler, Judge) with a deep background in personal development, Lara has also spent more than 16 years developing and delivering training and presentations in the areas of creativity, content marketing, organizational diversity, and leading creative teams. >> Lara received a bachelor's in journalism from Texas A&M University. Her work has garnered more than a dozen industry awards, and in 2015, she was named the Gene Barnwell Waugh Mentor of the Year by Women Communicators of Austin.

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Meet Pierpont

Where powerful storytelling and powerful results go hand in hand.

With deep Texas roots and a global reach, Pierpont Communications provides a powerful lens for storytelling for some of the world's most recognized organizations through public relations, public affairs, marketing, and digital communications campaigns. Since 1987, Pierpont has grown to become one of Texas' largest independent communications agencies with offices in Austin, Dallas, Houston, and San Antonio.

Quite simply, at Pierpont, we understand what's happening in our backyards. It's this insight into our markets—underscored by extensive experience in energy & power, healthcare & wellness, financial services, real estate and professional services—that helps our clients see around corners to identify new opportunities. Driven by a team of fearless thinkers, everything we do at Pierpont stems from our entrepreneurial spirit and bold creativity. That means we have the chops to develop and execute integrated campaigns that turn heads—and get results.

Learn More >> piercom.com



Appendix

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