

Making strategies stick – tackling anti-stories

by Mark Schenk and Kevin Bishop

At Anecdote, much of our work is focused on making strategies stick by converting them into understandable, memorable and influential stories. In each organisation we have worked with, we have encountered what we call ‘anti-stories’ – pre-existing beliefs and perceptions that work against the new strategy.

This article describes a range of ways to tackle these anti-stories – and tackle them you must if your strategic story is to be effective. The good news is that once you know what the anti-stories are, tackling them can often be relatively simple.

In writing this article we have assumed that you have done the work up-front to figure out what anti-stories are out there. It is also necessary to try and anticipate new anti-stories that might be triggered by your new strategy. Once you understand the anti-stories, you will be able to identify the appropriate responses from the approaches outlined in this article.

Acknowledge the anti-story

In June 2011, just months before he passed away¹, Steve Jobs introduced iCloud at Apple’s WorldWide Developers Conference.² After explaining the iCloud concept, Apple’s ‘next big thing’, Jobs said, “Now, you might ask, ‘Why should I believe them? They’re the ones that brought me MobileMe!’” The audience laughed uproariously. Everyone in the audience knew

that MobileMe had failed to live up to Apple’s reputation for user-friendliness. It just didn’t work. Jobs continued: “*It wasn’t our finest hour. Let me just say that. But we’ve learned a lot.*”

If everyone knows an anti-story, ignoring it only increases its power. It can prove very hard to dislodge, particularly if it’s true or well justified. Similarly, it’s a bad strategy to deny an anti-story – to declare it invalid or wrong. This often has two unwanted effects. The first is that by saying to staff, effectively, “*You’re wrong*”, you can trigger the confirmation bias, which simply reinforces their belief in the anti-story.³ The second is that this approach reduces a leader’s credibility and undermines the messages in the strategy. But by directly acknowledging an uncomfortable truth, you’ll go a long way towards negating its power. This simple strategy can make a big difference.

The negativity millions of loyal Apple users felt towards MobileMe was well justified; it was a source of constant annoyance to them. So just imagine what would have happened if Jobs had finished talking about iCloud without tackling the MobileMe issue, or by merely dismissing it. Everyone would have gone to the break talking about whether iCloud would be another failure like MobileMe. Apple’s iCloud strategy would have been undermined right from the start. By acknowledging what everyone already knew, Jobs effectively extinguished the power of the anti-story.

Use humour

The following example from US politics shows how humour – in particular, satire – can be used to tackle stories that are working against your objectives.

In the early stages of the 1992 presidential campaign, the incumbent George H.W. Bush was relentlessly attacking Hillary Clinton, labelling her unsuitable as a First Lady because she'd admitted that she hadn't spent her entire adult life baking cookies. The attacks from the White House ended when the Clinton campaign responded with, *"George Bush isn't running for President – apparently he's campaigning to become First Lady."*⁴

Steve Jobs also used humour in tackling the MobileMe anti-story, in the self-deprecating way he said, *"Now, you might ask, 'Why should I believe them? They're the ones that brought me MobileMe!'"*

Create a new story

It's useful to remember that you can't fight a story with a fact, only with another story. You should aim to create a new story in the organisation that challenges the existing troublesome one. There are three different ways you can do this.

1. Show what is different

In 2009, three Australian Government departments merged into one mega-department. A key part of the strategy, in which Anecdote was involved, was to successfully integrate the departments so that they operated as an effective team. But when we spoke to staff in these organisations, many of them talked about *"the next divorce"*. It turned out that the three departments had previously merged in the early 1990s, only to separate ('divorce') a few years later. So every time the issue of integration was again raised, it triggered the 'divorce' anti-story. It was totally undermining the strategy.

We decided that the best way to handle the situation was to tackle the anti-story 'head on'.

We began by talking to a few of the leaders who had been around back in the 1990s. It turned out that, in hindsight, one of the main contributors to the 'divorce' was the merged organisation's failure to make any significant changes. With this in mind, a leader of the new department related the following story to staff:

"I know many of you will be waiting for us to get 'divorced' again, just like in the 90s. But there is a big difference between then and now. In the 90s we made no effort to work together. Our taxpayers got no benefits and the government got no benefits. In many ways we brought the last divorce about through our own inaction. We need to learn from that and make sure we don't make the same mistake this time."

The first time he told this story, the leader gave two examples of dumb things the organisation had done which highlighted the failure of people to work together. It was very powerful. The leader had suddenly created a new story, one that the organisation could really relate to.

Tackling the anti-story in this way produced a new story in which staff saw their role in the last divorce, and then realised that the next divorce was not inevitable. It was a game-changer.

2. Change your behaviour

We have been working with National Australia Bank (NAB) for a few years now. Soon after Cameron Clyne took over as CEO, we started hearing stories about what had happened in his first few days at NAB.⁵

Meeting rooms are always at a premium in large organisations, and NAB, with its beautifully designed Docklands headquarters, is no exception. Before Clyne's intervention, some meeting rooms were set aside for use by general managers only. But now, everyone from a rookie analyst to the CEO has the same rights in booking and using any meeting room in the building.

Another story involved the CEO's office. The previous CEO and his staffers had resided in an area referred to as the 'bubble'. Visitors had to pass through two levels of security to gain access to this workspace, and the CEO could catch an elevator from the car park to the bubble without having to venture into the rest of the building. Clyne is now dismantling the bubble and relocating his office next to the internal cafe, without any special refurbishment of the new space.

By improving access to meeting rooms and to himself, the new CEO has created clear and powerful symbols of change – now the subject of equally powerful new stories.

3. Look at it from your audience's perspective

Since 2002, the US Government has been running a campaign called 'Above the Influence' to try and reduce, if not end, marijuana usage by American youth.⁶ One of the major early challenges for this campaign was the fact that lots of teenagers believed marijuana to be harmless; just a bit of fun. The scientific evidence was rock-solid on the negative health effects of the drug, but the message wasn't getting through because of the 'marijuana is harmless' anti-story. So the campaign changed its approach. Here is an excerpt from one of the subsequent radio adverts:

"I smoked weed and nobody died. I didn't get into a car accident. I didn't drown in some swimming pool. I didn't OD on heroin the next day. Nothing happened. We just sat on Pete's couch for 11 hours. Now you tell me, what's going to happen on Pete's couch? Might be the safest thing in the world ... Keep yourself protected from the truly scary things out in the real world – like ... asking a girl out to the movies ... Yeah, so I smoked weed and I didn't die. The problem is that I missed a good movie with a nice girl. So even though I didn't die, it's like a different kind of dying."

Rather than continuing to trumpet the negative health impacts of marijuana use, the campaign refocused on things that were more important to teenagers – like missing out on opportunities to have fun and enjoy life. The organisers found a unique way to address the anti-story, not coming at it directly but through what appealed to their audience, creating a new story about the negative effects of marijuana use.⁷

Challenge generalisations

One of the ways you often hear anti-stories expressed is through generalisations. A generalisation occurs where the speaker takes a particular experience and applies it generically to a multitude of other situations. The most common form of generalisation involves words like '*never*', '*always*', '*everyone*', '*no-one*', '*all*', etc.

You may hear anti-stories expressed with statements such as these (generalisations in italics):

- "*No-one* ever gets to go to those events; they *always* choose someone from upstairs."
- "This has *never* worked, *anywhere, ever*."
- "We will *never* be able to hit those numbers."

This can be frustrating to hear, because often the generalisations simply aren't true. So how do you challenge them? The most powerful way is to provide a counter-example – find and tell a story about when the generalisation has not been the case.

We were recently running a training course and quite early on, one of the delegates said: "*We never, ever have training. They just don't think it is important to invest in our development.*" To which we replied: "*Really, never? So this course you are on now doesn't count? Or the 14 such courses we have run across the whole of your organisation over the last 10 months? Or the fact that 112 of your peers have already taken a day out to attend this training?*"

We have also seen this approach used by other members of a group to challenge one of their own when a generalised anti-story comes out. In one case, a leadership team was working through an exercise when one of them said: *"I don't know why we are talking about developing our people and promoting from within. It never happens."* From across the table, a little voice said: *"Well, that's how I got to be here."* Dead silence. That ended the anti-story.

When you hear generalisations that undermine your strategy, it's worth taking some time to consider them further. Ask questions of your colleagues like, *"Has anyone else had this experience?"* and *"Are there any examples where this wasn't the case?"* Give them time to explore the generalisation and decide for themselves if it 'holds water'.

Show your character

If your staff don't trust you, then your strategy has little chance of success. On the other hand, if your staff are given an opportunity to learn more about you, such as your values and the things that matter to you – your character – they are much more likely to embrace your strategy. We refer to this as a 'Who am I?' story.

As Annette Simmons has explained, the key principle here is 'Show, don't tell'.⁸ For example, how much credence would you give to someone who stood in front of you and stated, *"I am an honest and trustworthy person. I won't let you down"*? If you are like us, then probably not much. There is a better way of revealing what sort of person you are.

The following was shared by a workshop participant in September 2011. It illustrates how seemingly ordinary moments can reveal a lot about someone's character:

Glenn was a HR manager in charge of merging two organisations in Mumbai, India. This required all the employees of one organisation to resign and then sign new employment contracts with the other. There was much worry and consternation about this. The thought of resigning from their long-term employer felt like a big decision to the affected employees, even though they'd been assured there would be no change in their pay or conditions. They just didn't have enough trust in the new organisation to do the right thing. A meeting of all the staff was organised to get them on board.

Glenn found himself looking at the slide pack he'd been given to share with the employees. He felt it lacked soul and wondered how he might do a better job. Then, on his way to the meeting, Glenn noticed a young boy, perhaps five or six years old, walking towards him. The boy was wearing a backpack and had a bag of groceries in one hand and a tin of eggs in the other. He was clearly struggling to carry his goods home to his family. Glenn went to help the boy, offering to carry his eggs. The boy was obviously anxious and looked frightened as Glenn approached; he was worried Glenn might steal his eggs, or drop them. But with gentle reassurance, Glenn convinced the boy to let him help. They walked together to the boy's home, where his mum was waiting at the front door. She also looked anxious to see her son with a strange, tall, white man. But then Glenn handed the eggs to the boy, who smiled and skipped inside, handing his parcels to his mum.

Glenn arrived at the meeting, where all the employees had gathered to hear him speak. He started his talk by telling a story about the boy he had just met. He finished by saying: "You also might feel anxious or even frightened, like that little boy. But I can assure you that I'm here to help you. You will have the same conditions as before."

All the employees resigned from their company and signed the new contract of employment.

Think back on one or two moments that had a big impact on you, and share them with your staff. You'll be surprised what happens when you come across as a person rather than 'management'.

Mea culpa

Are you perfect? Neither are we. We all get things wrong from time to time. The good news is that admitting our foibles and mistakes is a powerful way of showing people that things are going to change. Fifteen years ago, you would not have heard a business leader talk about humility. But times have changed. People have realised that greater influence comes from connection than from command and control.

The 'mea culpa' strategy is closely related to the concept of 'showing your character' discussed above. Sometimes your past behaviour works against your new strategy. If you are introducing new values, for example, people won't be too thrilled about 'respecting each other' if you have a penchant for chewing staff out in public, or any other disrespectful behaviour. So remember a moment when you did the wrong thing, and share it.

We were working with an insurance company recently, helping them craft their strategic story. During one exercise, the Finance Manager stood up and told her version of the strategic story around one of the key strategies – growth through acquisition. She started by saying: *"I always used to think acquisitions were about the numbers, about how the figures looked on the page and the calculations we used to get there. I was wrong. Acquisitions are about people."*

You could have heard a pin drop as she carried on talking about her past, about how she had always been the 'numbers girl' who had joined the organisation specifically to do deals and to use all of her intellect and experience to drive those

deals. She admitted her behaviour had bordered on the cold-hearted, that people had just been numbers, costs to be considered in the overall calculations, nothing more. She then shared a story about how she had come to realise the importance of people, and relations and culture, in successful acquisitions. She almost seemed ashamed of how she used to be.

It was a very powerful moment, one that sent a clear message to all of those listening that what she used to think and how she used to behave were not helpful – they were simply wrong.

Make tough calls

Tackling anti-stories can often require a leader to acknowledge that things have been less than perfect. In large organisations this can be very difficult; conventional wisdom counsels a leader to gloss over the negatives and emphasise the positives. But we would argue that, in the case of getting your strategy to stick, tough decisions often need to be made.

Take the iCloud story. There would've been many people at Apple who had put their hearts and souls into MobileMe. When Steve Jobs stood in front of the world and bagged it, these people were likely 'gutted'. Jobs could have chosen to maintain harmony and avoid embarrassing them. But by doing so he would have undermined the company's strategy. Instead, he strengthened the strategy at the expense of some of his people's feelings and short-term morale. Not an easy decision, but the right one.

In communicating strategy, leaders often need to show courage in saying aloud what most people in the organisation already know. We hope this paper has given you some strategies for how to do exactly that. Tackling anti-stories is a vital step in making your strategy stick.



Mark Schenk and Kevin Bishop are from Anecdote Pty Ltd, a management consulting firm that uses its expertise in story to inspire enduring organisational change.

Its clients include IBM, Shell, KPMG, the Australian Treasury, Fuji Xerox, NAB, Cadbury, Schweppes and Rio Tinto.

Other articles by Mark and Kevin and the Anecdote team can be found at www.anecdote.com

You can automatically receive future articles via email (at no cost) by subscribing to Anecdote's newsletter on our website <http://www.anecdote.com.au/subscribe.php>

Contact Mark at:

Phone: +61 2 6161 4009
mark.schenk@anecdote.com
twitter.com/mschenkau

Contact Kevin at:

Phone: +61 3 9923 7370
kevin.bishop@anecdote.com
twitter.com/kevinsbishop

anecdote
Putting stories to work®

¹Sadly, Steve Jobs died the same day this paper came out of its final edit.

²The full iCloud keynote can be viewed at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O_C1TZIT-qQ

³Confirmation bias is a tendency for people to favour information that confirms their preconceptions or hypotheses regardless of whether the information is true.

⁴As related in Denning, S. (2005): *The Leader's Guide to Storytelling*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco.

⁵First covered in a post on the Anecdote blog: http://www.anecdote.com.au/archives/2009/03/a_leaders_role.html

⁶See <http://www.abovetheinfluence.com>

⁷From Denniston, R.W. (2008): *Above the Influence: National Youth Anti-Drug Media Campaign (2002–2006)*, in Kotler, P. & Lee, N.R. (2008): *Social Marketing: Influencing Behaviors for Good*, 3rd edition, Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, California.

⁸Simmons, A. (2002): *The Story Factor*, Basic Books, New York.