



The power of storytelling

Why do some strategies become a roaring success while others barely get out of the boardroom door? Jeroen De Flander – author of *The Execution Shortcut* – says internal communicators are key, especially if they harness the power of storytelling.

Draw an imaginary 'E' on your forehead... Now, did you draw it with the solid bar on your left and the openings on the right? Or with the solid bar on your right with the openings on the left?

The first choice produces a backward and illegible 'E' from the viewer's perspective. The second choice leads to an 'E' that's backwards to you but could be read by someone else.

Researchers discovered that business leaders are more likely to opt for the first because the more power we have, the harder we find it to imagine the world from someone else's perspective. They draw the letter backwards because they're used to others adapting to their point of view. The point for communicators is fairly obvious – a good message is crafted for the recipient rather than the

person sending the message.

The 'E' story is one of around 20 used by Jeroen De Flander as chapter openers in his new book *The Execution Shortcut*. Each story illustrates the point he's about to make as he attempts to explain why some strategies become a huge success and others never get off the ground.

He uses a storyteller's approach because his research shows that communication (or lack of it) is one of the main hurdles new strategies face – and storytelling is the most effective way of communicating.

"If you wrap a story around the message it's easier for people to absorb – people like to read stories, it puts information into context," says Jeroen, co-founder of research, training and advisory firm, the performance factory, and author of previous bestseller *Strategy Execution Heroes*.

"It's easier for people to communicate the message to others because it's easier to remember," he says simply, adding that his own research shows it's 20 times easier to remember



► a point with a story. But it can't be just any story. "Communicators have a very important role to find stories that enhance the message," says Jeroen. "You can't just bolt a story onto your message."

"If I had started each chapter of my book with any story, it might be good to read but it wouldn't add value because it wouldn't match the message." He stresses that finding the right story is key because if strategies are to work, behaviours need to change so employees need more than information, they need a reason to act and a way of remembering the message.

"We're often told that knowledge is the key to everything and it's about finding the knowledge and passing it on – but that's not how behaviours get changed," he says. "You first have to aim for the heart."

"Internal communicators must make that stretch in their mind. My experience, working with internal communicators, is that they often get bogged down with the knowledge and passing it on. "They put it in a nice PowerPoint or present it nicely on the intranet and hope for the best. Many organisations just do communication as an exercise, they say

'It's important to communicate' but that's where it stops.

"Many communicators don't take up the role they could - they really could become advisors on strategic communication rather than just passing the message on."

Jeroen, is based in Belgium but has worked in more than 30 countries for organisations like AXA, Credit Suisse, Honda, ING, Johnson & Johnson, Sony and the Belgian postal service.

"Communicators should always be on the lookout for stories they can use to show people how a strategy can work," he says. "It's amazing how many stories are

available inside an organisation."

He also says people are welcome to use the stories he has collected in *The Execution Shortcut* – and he says everything from the urban myth about kidney harvesting to facts about Roger Bannister breaking the four-minute mile can be used in business comms.

"Repeat my stories," he says. "Some people, those that focus too much on content, see the stories as a by-product, but every communicator should put the story central – they'll then take off and the strategy will follow." ►

"Communicators really could become advisors on strategic communication rather than just passing the message on."

Jeroen De Flander

The Execution Shortcut by Jeroen De Flander is published by the performance factory. Many of the stories included in the book are collected in a shorter e-book called *Why Most Ideas Fail* – IoIC members can download a copy **FREE** [here](#)

GOING GAGA

Believe it or not Lady Gaga has become a worldwide success not because of her great music or extravagant costumes but through her stories...

That's Jeroen De Flander's verdict, and he explains: "She was the first one who started to see YouTube not as a music channel but a platform to share stories."

"At first people treated it like Twitter and just put small clips on there but she realised people's attention span would be longer for the right thing and saw YouTube as basically a story-

telling platform."

Early videos like *Paparazzi* and *Alejandro* are seven or eight minutes long and include a whole scenario, not just the song.

"She wrapped stories around her songs so they were like little movies."

"People then shared the video, not so much for the music but because it was a good video."



"If you transport that to an organisation, once we have captured a strategy on PowerPoint, IC can use Lady Gaga's strategy - start looking for stories that enhance the key messages."

What others thought...

Grabbed by the heart

► There are hundreds of books about how to devise and execute the perfect strategy.

Many of them even include a section on how to communicate your strategy. But where this book is different to the norm is that the importance of engagement is demonstrated the whole way through.

De Flander has a simple hypothesis – to deliver programmes and projects quickly and not get lost on the 'execution highway' he advocates a H3 approach – engaging the Head, Heart and Hands. He details how you need to appeal to people's intellect – to make them aware; to their emotions – to make them care; and to their delivery

capability – to give them energy and drive.

As a Change Communication specialist, the section that really piqued my attention was in the 'Heart' section where De Flander talks stories and their ability to make strategy stick in people's minds and hearts. As he says: 'Stories offer listeners crucial message context. They offer additional information helping listeners to frame the facts in a setting that makes sense to them.'

Practising what he preaches, he starts each chapter with a tale to illustrate his point, referring back to them regularly throughout the subsequent chapters. He uses them to reinforce the importance of

stories as 'emotional connectors' and thus reinforcing the role of Communication and Engagement in helping delivery. If you want a detailed description of how to execute a change strategy then this is probably not the book for you. But if you want an accessible, readable look at delivery and the role that engagement can play in helping to make it happen then I would definitely give *The Execution Shortcut* a try.

*Justine Stevenson, communication manager,
Group Finance, Deutsche Bank*

Stories that stick

Jeroen De Flander has achieved that rare thing, a business book that doesn't feel like a chore.

In a bid to explain why some strategies work and others fail, he starts each chapter with a story, and they're good ones. There's everything from a guy who lost nearly eight stone eating nothing but Subway sandwiches who was ignored (at first) by the company's ad experts, to the recorded cockpit conversation that could have saved an Air Florida crash if only the co-pilot had had the nerve to say 'No'.

Each story makes a major point which is then backed up with research to illustrate De Flander's

theories such as 'facilitate small choices' or 'experience the power of habits'. Because the stories are memorable and key to the message they should stick with you and offer practical tips that stick in your mind, and he even provides a very useful visual reminder for each tale.

Comms is only part of what *The Execution Shortcut* covers but it's significant enough to prove useful to most communicators.

Barry Rutter, InsideOut editor 