



The Story of Us

» BY DARCY NYBO

Being able to tell your company's story is the first step to a top performing corporate culture

Everyone has a story to tell. Samantha Reynolds and her team at Echo Memoirs Ltd. have compiled hundreds of stories. Although each is different, Reynolds has found there are themes that often run through the storyline of companies: David versus Goliath, or the small taking on the big; companies who are pioneers; companies who create out of necessity; companies who overcome overwhelming obstacles; and companies who reinvent themselves by recognizing their mistakes. Each theme gives a distinct shape to corporate culture. Knowing your company's story is the first step to achieving a top performance culture.

The story of MSA, a global company and leader in the manufacture and supply of safety products, is a great example of a company that developed out of necessity—in this case a tragedy. On the morning of March 26, 1912, the Jed Mine in West Virginia exploded. Methane gas ignited and more than 80 miners died. The company founders went to Thomas Edison with their problem. Edison then helped them create the electric cap lamp, which reduced mine explosions by 75% over the next 25 years. It is a gripping, true-life tale about the founding ideas of the company and it inspires employees to this day.

“Writing a company’s story is an intimate process for our clients as well as being emotional for the writers,” says Reynolds. “One of the things I look for in a client is they see their story as something more than propaganda.”

Peter Higgins, President of Purdy’s Chocolates, hired Echo Memoirs to get the Purdy’s story told for their 100th anniversary. “Purdy’s got their start in 1907 on Robson Street in Vancouver, B.C. We wanted to celebrate all of the amazing things that happened the first 100 years,” Higgins says. “It was a great tool to do that. We got to pull out information and archives, historical stories and photos, and it brought our history to life. It’s good to have it all in one location—the book—rather than in the memories of many over the years.”

Higgins says the book has become a guiding compass for all Purdy’s employees. “We are very much about people,” he says. “Now we have this central point to take pride in our history, and relish in it, and realize we are moving forward.”

The process of creating their story took a few months and Higgins had a core of group of people gathering information for their book.

Higgins says there were inspiring stories from the Great Depression, but that his favourite comes from the Second World War, when sugar was rationed. “Hugh Forrester, the owner at the time, came up with this great idea. He wouldn’t open the doors until noon and then he would ration the purchases. He set a limit of buying a one-pound box at most.



TOTAL RECALL: Echo Memoirs Ltd. has compiled the stories hundreds of companies.

By 12:30, the chocolate would be sold out,” Higgins says, “A lot of people could have shut down, but he kept going and found a unique way to stay connected with his customers.”

Higgins found the common theme running through his company story once the book was complete: people triumphing over adversity.

“If we look back over 100 years, we can see Purdy’s is about overcoming challenges and obstacles,” he says. “Today we talk about the current economic challenges, but when you think back on it, from 1907 to 1940 there were two world wars and the depression. The company went into receivership in 1925.” By telling their own story, they realized that since they’d made it through hard times before, they could do it again. The heart of the business is how they work together to create great product. “Purdy’s isn’t just about chocolate,” Higgins says. “We’re about people.”

Higgins recalls an ad they found from 1918 that sums up the Purdy’s philosophy then, and stands true to this day. It said, “Purdy’s chocolates... as good as usual.” And that was only 11 years into the business.

When the book was complete, every employee received a copy. Five years later, the company still is reaping the benefits of having their company story told.

When Purdy’s expanded into Ontario, the book proved particularly useful. The company was a virtual unknown in central Canada and the book was used as an introduction to landlords and suppliers to foster understanding of the company. Purdy’s has now opened its 61st Canadian location and is at a tipping point.

Higgins is a big fan of the story development process and recommends that other companies embark on it as a way to define themselves. “It’s an important part of business,” he says. “We are building on those that have gone before us. It helps cement the company culture. It helps employees appreciate who we are.” Purdy’s book demonstrates that business is about a community that enjoys working hard together and supports each other like a family.

“Purdy’s is a great example of the type of company we look for to write their stories,” says Reynolds. “Pride in what they do is one of the things we really look for. We want customers that are on fire about getting their whole story out. Authenticity is also important.”



Methodically gathering information can help resolve uncertainties, and bring some clarity to how

people view their company.

“There may be two cultures blended in a company due to a take over or a merger, or maybe they are a young company. Storytelling can help businesses uncover who they are.”

Reynolds advises that there are some clear guidelines for telling a great story and uncovering corporate culture. “Be honest, have the courage to admit regrets and defeats as much as the giddiness to celebrate success,” she says. “There needs to be a readiness to honour the legends in their company. Not just the founders, but living legends as well, the key people who’ve helped build the company. This can be true for a young or an old company.”

Reynolds also looks for stories that reflect the company values. She calls it “a values roadmap of the company.” Creating a narrative can provide a guide to decision-making at all levels of an organization. And top performers like Purdy’s and MSA consistently have a clear view of their own

story and how it has created and fostered the company.

There are other ways telling their own stories can be benefit businesses.

“Lululemon used their book before they went public while they were drumming up excitement for the company,” says Reynolds. “Other companies are international and tell their story in several different languages.” Being able to clearly enunciate the purpose, philosophy, history and goals of a company bonds its employees, even those of a global or national company with many outlets.

A clear corporate story can also help you enter new markets. Reynolds says clients working in international locations with significant cultural differences use storytelling in much the same way Purdy’s does, as an intimate introduction that demonstrates the values of the organization.

Providing clear understanding of who you are to media helps spread the message, attracting not just like-minded staff but other stakeholders, making it a great tool for investor relations. Reynolds recalls one client in particular, whose strategy was to be acquired by a larger company. With vision and will, the story came together within a few months with the press run of a few hundred copies. Within 60 days, a call from a Switzerland-based company was received

and the sale was arranged.

Others use their story to strengthen strategic partnerships by keeping them inside and informed. Some even offer their book for sale.

Creating a narrative allows staff, managers and investors to see themselves within the context of the organization, creating loyalty not just within the company, but among customers, too. When employees know their story and work within a defined culture it fosters long-term engagement that’s tough to achieve otherwise.

“In a competitive marketplace, telling a company’s story and showing pride will attract and retain employees,” Reynolds says. As for the Echo Memoirs story, Reynolds captures the history as it unfolds. “We’ve learned that we need to chronicle as we go.” And her company’s 15th anniversary is coming up. **EW**

Tell Your Story

When it comes to telling your story, you have lots of options. Here are some tips to get you started.

ASK THE EXPERTS: Solicit stories and memories from current and retired employees or family members of deceased employees.

START COLLECTING: Collect the memorabilia—caps, t-shirts, pens, archival photos—your company has generated in the past.

GO DIGITAL: Make videos of the stories of current and retired staff.

FAMILY MATTERS: Access your networks and find generations of family who have worked for your company.

TIME IT: Create a timeline and put it on your company’s website. Revisit the website regularly.

MARK SPECIAL OCCASIONS: Use the information and memorabilia to commission milestones. Think about a magazine, a brand new interactive website or beautiful keepsake book.