



MARKETING CONTENT STRATEGY

What Is a Chief Storyteller? Five Business Leaders Share Their Stories

Lauren McMenemy

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Once upon a time there were businesses, and businesses needed to sell things to survive. So those businesses brought in salespeople, and marketers, and advertisers, and eventually PR and communications teams as they grew and grew. Life was good for good businesses.

And then some smart businesses realized what they had been doing all along: They had been telling stories to attract staff and customers. And those people who'd been building the businesses realized what they were all along: They were storytellers. And the modern phenomenon of the corporate chief storyteller was born.

But what is a chief storyteller exactly? A LinkedIn search for the job title “storyteller” reveals almost 10,000 hits. Sure, that’s nothing compared to the more than 700,000 who list “writer” in their title, but it’s the beginning of visibility. This is not a new role; Nike employed a chief storytelling officer in the 1990s. That so many businesses are now outwardly admitting storytelling is in their DNA—even if it’s just a jump onto marketing trends bandwagons—means the chief storyteller is emerging as a force to be reckoned with.



different backgrounds and with different stories to tell, seeking the essence of what makes the role—and the people in it—unique.

Stories from the “Traditional” Multinational: Steve Clayton, Chief Storyteller, Microsoft

The word “Microsoft” will conjure an image in everyone’s mind, usually around software, Bill Gates, old-school technology, and corporations—at least, that’s what it used to be. Steve Clayton and his team are working to change that because Microsoft itself is changing.

As chief storyteller at Microsoft, Clayton is changing the public perception of the brand, from old-school to world-changing. He’s proud of the impact they’re making. It’s the stories about the impact of their technology in India that’s improving farmers yield by 30 percent. Or it’s the story of how the Skype translator is letting him talk to his Chinese mother-in-law for the first time and the impact that tech has had on his family.



It's very easy to **slip into celebrating yourself** and celebrating your product, but it's **a lot more rewarding** to go and **find stories** of where those products **actually have an impact.**

Steve Clayton - *Chief Storyteller, Microsoft*



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“When we launched Windows 10,” he says, “which traditionally are these moments where you go and have a big celebration, we wanted to use the day to bring our mission to life instead, which is to empower every person and every organization on the planet to achieve more. We went to a village in the middle of Kenya and celebrated a group of local entrepreneurs who brought Wi-Fi connectivity to a community that never had that before. It was much more about celebrating the impact technology can have on 30,000 people effectively instead of celebrating the product we just launched. It’s very easy to slip into celebrating yourself and celebrating your product, but it’s a lot more rewarding to go and find stories of where those products actually have an impact.”



being handpicked to move to Seattle and take on the mantle of chief storyteller — his dream job. (He tells the story of how he got the role in [this TEDx Talk](#).) Now he's on stage with the CEO launching new technology, or he's at the helm of the wonderful *Microsoft Stories Lab*, oft-cited as one of the best content hubs out there.

“In some ways, the biggest challenge is to continue to hold a high bar for storytelling,” he says. “When we did the first story on the Stories website, ‘88 Acres,’ about four years ago, it was basically an experiment to see if we could tell stories externally that other people would consume and share. It turned out so well a number of groups internally came to my team and said, ‘We’d love to do the same thing and tell a story.’ One team said they wanted to tell a story about this product, and we said, ‘Great! Tell us who are the characters, the hero, the journey, where’s the tension’ — all those good aspects that make a great story. And they said, ‘No, we really want to tell a great story about this product.’ It became clear that people had become mesmerized by the execution of the story — the visuals and the website and the writing — but had not really grasped the notion of what makes a great story. In some ways that remains the challenge: to hold a high bar to show what a story really is in the truest sense.”

Storytelling has gripped Microsoft to the extent that Clayton’s team now runs an annual storytelling summit; this year it “sold out” its 450 internal tickets in under one hour. The discipline and craft of storytelling has become integral to what Microsoft does as a company.

“I think there is more of an appetite for people to learn directly from companies,” he says. “I think people have what I’ll call a post-Enron-era desire and request for transparency from companies, and lots of companies have bought into that, not just Microsoft, in order to be able to tell stories directly. There is a shifting landscape in media where the media increasingly has pursued stories that are news stories because that’s the business model they’re in, so some of the stories we want to tell don’t necessarily make the bar for stories that we would tell in partnership with a news outlet or a media outlet. So we just tell them ourselves. Plus, look at the [Edelman Trust Barometer](#) — the most trusted voices are the employees of companies.



turning back to other mediums that are more immersive, whether that's vinyl records or podcasts. I think that's something of an indication that there's a bit of a backlash between this attention economy where our attention is constantly being pulled from one thing to the next.

“That’s really some of why we set up Stories. We believe there is an appetite for people who want to read a story, and we think we have great stories to tell. Stories have stood the test of time. No one goes into pub and says, ‘I want to tell you some data.’ They say, ‘Let me tell you about a movie I saw, or a book I read, or a journey I took, or person I met.’ Stories get embellished and they get retold, and that’s why some of the greatest stories have stood the test of time.”

Stories from Amazing Tech: Louis Richardson, Chief Storyteller, IBM Watson Customer Engagement

Consider, if you will, the best and most amazing sci-fi story you ever read. Now, consider telling that story for a living. That’s the life of Louis Richardson, the man who gets to tell the stories about IBM Watson.

Richardson is a natural storyteller; his conversations are woven with analogies and riffs to get his message across. Unlike many of the chief storytellers we spoke to, Richardson comes from a sales background. “I’m not a formally educated storyteller; I am not a trained ambassador,” he laughs. “I am just a conversationalist. I love having conversations with people. I’ve always seen that in connections with customers and audiences, what really helps you be genuine and transparent is having a conversation.”

Richardson started his working life as a graphic artist—“so I’m visual to begin with”—and he’s always appreciated great design and great messaging, the study of not only what’s being said but how it’s said and presented. That’s what he brings to his storytelling role. “Plus, all the failed sales calls. All the times you walk away, think gee that didn’t go well, that person just didn’t understand it. The series of debriefings around what happened. Over time, you realize what works and what doesn’t work, and that’s shaped me into the storyteller I am today.”



He's been calling himself a storyteller for IBM for quite a while—long before the role became an accepted norm, back when people would assume he “couldn't find a real job.” For the last couple of years, he's been immersed in Watson, IBM's incredible AI tech, helping to find and develop the stories that come from customers, all while trying to make this incredibly complex tech more simple for the average joe. That's where stories help: “Watson helps to start conversations, but Watson can also be a bit of a stumbling block because it is so different and it is so complex that people tend to liken it to things they already know. Sometimes that doesn't give it the differentiation it needs.

“A lot of what I spend my time doing is challenging [IBM] to rethink the way we communicate our message to people. We for a long time have built our reputation around being technically competent and interesting or relevant to technical people. Walking in to talk to a technologist and sharing what you do is fairly easy in that sense—you can do that a lot with facts and figures—but now we're having to change because the audience now is more line-of-business focused. We have to take that message and make it relevant and interesting to them. And I happen to believe story is the way to do that.”



With Watson being such a magical technology, **IBM is now in the business of stories**, relations, and magic. It's **no longer** about selling things.

Louis Richardson - *Chief Storyteller, IBM Watson*



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Richardson, of course, has a story to tell about the change in conversation over his years as a storyteller: “I individualize the information age and conceptual age with Spock and Kirk,” he says. “Spock is the information age person. They tend to focus on things. Change is serious; things are black and white. Logic plays a heavy role in what they do and what they say. And then the conceptual age is the Kirk. They’re the empathetic people, the ones who fly by the seat of their pants. Change is fun, and they like stories. While today’s decision-makers have Spock on the bridge with them, it’s the Kirks that are actually running businesses. And so we, like many companies, have to shift our focus from only speaking to Spock, to turning around and making sure Kirk gets the message.



always trying to move people. That movement, I think, requires story. You can't just convince people anymore. Seth Godin said people are no longer buying goods and services, they're buying stories and relations and magic. With Watson being such a magical technology, IBM is now in the business of stories, relations and magic. It's no longer about selling things.

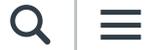
“We all too often get caught up in this listen to understand versus listen to reply, and I think that's partly a lack of time, or ‘would you please stop talking so I can answer your question and inject my point of view.’ As storytellers, we learn to listen and dig for the story. If someone gives you something they're not feeling right about or something they're concerned with, then ask them about it. Tell them a story about that. Give an example. That curiosity, that empathy and the care it shows doesn't just make you a better businessperson. I think it makes you a better human.”

Stories from the European Subsidiary: Yari Bovalino, Chief Storyteller, Avio Aero, a GE Aviation Business

One thing stuck out as I searched for chief storytellers: They were, by and large, all based Stateside. Italian Yari Bovalino might work for a business with a US parent in GE, but he's bringing marketing trends in the guise of the chief storyteller to a European base.

“What is most intriguing is that this role was assigned to me by my Italian leader, who definitely received unquestioning support from our GE Aviation headquarters in Cincinnati. At the very beginning, I caught glimpses of mocking and snickering from some of those who were hearing the title for the very first time. Now I can say it's becoming more and more recognized as a contemporary and key communications role even in Italy, like in the other European countries in which I create content.

“Today at times it's overrated, because some people (perhaps ironically) look at you as an industrial poet or fantasy author, with the expectation that you're going to transform his or her new solution, product, or design discovery into a fab story. It is



course, commitment to the readers, as the audience is the storyteller's ultimate arbiter.”

Bovalino is chief storyteller at *Avio Aero*, a GE Aviation business. His job description, he says, gives him responsibility to “interpret Avio Aero’s strategy and priorities, and transform them into an integrated and consistent narrative that is founded on people, product, and technology excellence, for both internal and external audiences, including GE and GE Aviation global channels.” What that means in a day-to-day capacity is that he’s constantly searching for great stories to tell. He’s out in the field with engineers, tech specialists, workers, partners, agencies, meeting amazing people and learning new things—and trying to make the building of these massive structures into intriguing stories for the business. His typical day, says Bovalino, is really only 40 percent composing; the rest is seeking out the story. Those stories run in Avio Aero’s *About* magazine, as well as GE Aviation’s *The Bike Shop* and *GE Reports*. The latter, like Microsoft’s *Stories*, is oft-cited as content marketing best practice.

“In the aviation industry, and in GE more widely, we deal with some of the most complex (both from a manufacturing and a design stand point), technologically advanced, and sensitive products on the global market. It’s a challenge to ‘popularize’ this complexity, to make it more easily understood to those outside the industry. But doing this work, I think it’s kind of a vocation. I don’t want to make it that overblown, but I mean it’s something that starts from your inner willingness to learn, discover, and truly involve people in seeing what you see inside a story about individuals, professionals, products, technologies, and see even further.

“As a storyteller, we must find a purpose, a subject, a plot, and an audience—or invent them—and then compose!”



As a storyteller, **we must find a purpose**,
a subject, a plot, and an audience—or invent them
— **and then compose!**

Yari Bovalino - *Chief Storyteller, Avio Aero, a GE Aviation business*



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Stories from Startups: Everett Cook, Chief Storyteller, Wefunder

Journalism is a natural background for a company's chief storyteller, and that's where Everett Cook started his journey—from covering sports for the likes of the *Los Angeles Times* and *Boston Globe*, to teaching literature at the University of Michigan, Cook is straight-up a words guy. He joined tech startup Wefunder last summer with a remit to tell the stories of the companies seeking investment.

“The larger idea is that, for all intents and purposes, I be the voice of the brand,” he says. In practice that means writing profile pages for companies as well as more



“I’ve had to learn a lot, and I’m continuing to do so, but I think the background of a journalist helps you paint. The feature stories I do, those are the same stories I’d be writing at a newspaper.” The difference is that at Wefunder, Cook is working on a lot more at once—and in an industry that’s only been legal since May 2016. That means he’s not just telling the stories of the companies involved but also telling the story of regulation of crowdfunding to potential investors.



There are stories everywhere—
it almost doesn't matter who you're employed
by or where you are. And that's the **greatest**
thing about this role.

Everett Cook - *Chief Storyteller, Wefunder*



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new Orleans, stopping in five or six cities along the way, and met a bunch of people. A lot of Silicon Valley doesn't think about these people or interact with them. I had the opportunity to take the struggles of a brewery owner in Memphis and make those real to an investor in San Francisco.”

Cook's biggest advice to those seeking a storytelling career? Be flexible, but also fight for the type of writing you believe in. “Figure out the ethos of the place you want to work, then intertwine your own experience with that ethos. There are stories everywhere—it almost doesn't matter who you're employed by or where you are. And that's the greatest thing about this role.”

Stories That Help Companies Save Cultures: Inky Gibbens, Chief Storyteller, Tribalingual

Sometimes the stories demand to be heard. That's the case with Tribalingual, an edutech company whose self-proclaimed mission is to protect the heritage of rare and endangered cultures by offering online courses. They use first-language speakers who know the heart of the culture and the stories that have been crafted over generations. This is the very origin of storytelling.

Why cultural death is a shared loss | Inky Gibbens | TEDxCambri...



Founder Inky Gibbens—born in Mongolia; grew up in a ger (yurt)—opted not to call herself the CEO or the managing director. Instead, she chose to go by chief



“What I’ve found is that it is the story of our mission that resonates most with people, whoever it is. I never really would’ve put myself as a storyteller before this at all—my experience is in startups and I wasn’t a good public speaker. I’d rather sit in the back and be invisible. But when I started talking about Tribalingual, it just came to me quite naturally.”

Inky comes from a background in insights and languages, which brings a unique perspective to the role of the chief storyteller. She insists on making it clear there is a group of people around her helping to tell the story; she “articulates the vision and mission,” while making sure everyone in the team has their role to play.



I don't see why **social impact and commercialization** can't go together. If we want to make the social impact, we need the investment and funding. **And so we need the stories.**

Inky Gibbens - *Chief Storyteller, Tribalingual*



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“It’s been very humbling to see people’s response to Tribalingual. What started out as just an idea has quickly turned into a movement, so to speak. I like to say we are running out of time because of what we’re doing. Time is our biggest competitor, and we have people working around the clock to make this a success.

“Someone once asked me what success looks like to me—is it floating on the stock exchange, or is it that Navajo is still spoken? I don’t see why social impact and commercialization can’t go together. It’s not an either–or. If we want to make the social impact, we need the investment and funding. And so we need the stories. Storytelling is very much part of Tribalingual anyway. We’re not a B2B business selling paper clips. It all revolves around human connectedness.”

One word came up time and again while talking to these amazing storytellers—one key skill or piece of wisdom that they would impart to those interested in this field. Says Microsoft’s Steve Clayton, “It all comes down to curiosity. It’s really all it is.”

So what is a chief storyteller? Not every great storyteller is a great writer. Sometimes they’re great artists, or photographers, or documentarians. Sometimes they’re just great talkers, speakers, presenters. But what every great storyteller has is an innate curiosity to dive deeper, to get beneath the surface and find that intricate detail that will bring people along for the ride. They go off the beaten path and they find the small differences in the day-to-day.

So get curious. Tell stories. But share stories, too, and talk about the craft. The corporate world is catching on to the idea that great content must tell great stories; wouldn’t you like to be part of the revolution?

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by Lauren McMenemy



Lauren is a storyteller. A journalist by trade, she has worked in agencies, in-house and in the media over her 20-year career. She’s worked as an editorial strategist and content creator for some of the world’s biggest brands, setting up processes and guidelines, advising on planning, auditing content, building loyal audiences, leading social campaigns, writing blogs and flyers and presentations - pretty much handling the stuff with words. She was born in Australia, has resided in London for the last decade, and writes fiction on the side. You’ll often find her grinning like a fool at a rock concert.



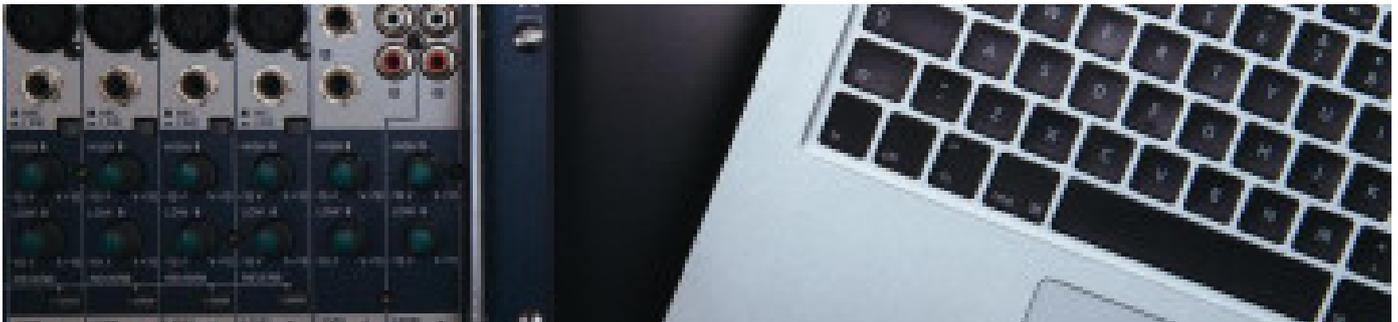
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A Tale of Two Sodas—In Coke and Pepsi's Pizza Fight, Brand Storytelling Wins the Day



Mixed Media Content Strategy Still a Challenge for Most Marketers



New England's Top 40 Influencers in Content and Digital Marketing



Join the discussion...

David H Deans • 24 days ago

Thank you, Lauren, for these insightful profiles. I'm now wondering, when a company with a long history has a Chief Storyteller that's focused on "a mission to change the perception" of their employer, why does the brand's image in the marketplace not reflect the evolving narrative of their marketers? Why the disconnect?

It's been a common legacy PR problem. When does a corporate 'fiction' become reality? Who decides?

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›

Lauren McMenemy → **David H Deans** • 19 days ago

Thanks, David. I agree, the disconnect with a brand's image and the evolving narrative can be a real issue. Sometimes the older image is just so ingrained that it will take more than sharing a few stories to make any lasting change. Storytelling is not a quick fix, and it doesn't work in isolation. It needs to be embedded throughout an organisation, and they need to give it the time to work its magic. Once all employees are bought in to the story, and start telling it themselves, the seed is planted...

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Andrew McAvinchey • 21 days ago

This is a fascinating article and I felt such a relief as I read it. Narrative and storytelling are becoming increasingly important as we attempt to weave together the journeys we bring people on with data and technology. Ironically, it has been a challenge to tell the true story of why synthesis and understanding and a storytellers perspective are going to be needed as our world and the value we create for customers become more complex. Story is the only way to encapsulate this value.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

Lauren McMenemy → **Andrew McAvinchey** • 19 days ago

Thanks, Andrew. I'm glad you enjoyed the story. As someone who's subscribed to this narrative style of writing for more years than I care to admit, I'm glad to see it finally gathering speed!

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