

WHEN WAS THE LAST TIME YOU HEARD A GOOD STORY?

BY TIM GEISERT, KENEXA, AN IBM COMPANY

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Once upon a time in a land far, far away, an employee culture existed that was worthy of its reputation... Back when I was young (and had hair), I had the distinct pleasure of working for what I thought was one of the best companies in the United States. I was initially attracted to the organization because of the positive stories I had heard. For instance, during an interview, the founder of the organization was asked, "what is it like to work in your company?" As a person with a dry sense of humor, he simply smiled and answered, well, I hear it's not so bad; it's always warm in the winter, cool in the summer."

I will always appreciate the understated nature of that comment because in reality it was a great place to work and everyone knew it. He knew how to make light of everything, and in the high-pressure competitive advertising business, that is what we needed from the boss—his humor diffused any tension. He was a very honest, ethical leader; all his employees wanted to do their best and work hard for him and the organization.

Consequently, for 15 years the organization thrived. However, looking back, it was not the fact that we produced high-quality work and exceeded the clients' expectations that made it a great place to work. It was the stories that were created from the culture and experiences. Everyone loved to tell them to everyone they knew.

An example of an experience that turned out to be a pivotal point in my life was the time the senior management team left for a cruise one Wednesday night. They did not mention this vacation to the rest of the staff; in fact, the way we found out was from a note stuck to the front door. The note explained they would be gone until Monday and that those in the office were now in charge. The note suggested we quickly pull together a meeting, elect an interim general manager and senior staff, and that we did not break anything.

What happened over the next four days became legendary in the history of the company. And, in that brief time, careers were made and careers were ruined. They were the most interesting four days of my entire corporate life.

That was one of many experiences turned into a story. Employees, clients and competitors loved to share these stories. It made the place legendary, almost magical. Most importantly, it attracted the type of people that wanted to perpetuate that legend. It was fun. The place had a great Cultural Brand.

What are your company's stories? Does your company culture breed the type of stories that end up being organizational folklore? Have some of those great stories fallen by the wayside? If so, maybe you need to resurrect them. On the other hand, create more.

Why do we need stories? By describing them, they help us understand the deeper meaning of things that are sometimes hard to articulate. Stories help us understand a concept from the "head's" perspective as well as from the "heart's." To illustrate, let me share another story.

Years ago, I served as an advertising agent for a very large, privately held bank. The owner was adamant about following protocol and displaying proper manners. Knowing how important this was to the culture, I invited my fellow agency partners to an “etiquette seminar” led by the bank’s corporate event planner.

During that session, someone asked, “Why does using these manners matter so much?” The question was answered by telling a story. According to the legends from those who knew Henry Ford, he was a stickler for manners and etiquette—much like the owner of the bank. Before hiring any senior executive, Mr. Ford would invite them to a meal to observe how candidates would conduct themselves. Watching every move and phrase a candidate used, Mr. Ford would determine if they were worthy of being a Ford Motor employee.

On some occasions, Mr. Ford was so alarmed by the lack of manners that he would abruptly stand up and walk away from the table, leaving the candidate stunned and embarrassed. As you might expect, it did not take long before employees and prospects knew the expectations of the senior management at Ford Motor.

I believe that the perpetual telling of this story taught us two lessons. First, Mr. Ford was a stickler for detail and an employee or prospect’s attention to detail had to be impeccable. Second, standards were very high at Ford Motor. In addition, if an employee or prospect did not live up to these principles, the result would be a form of embarrassment.

The event planner could have simply said, “Important bank customers have the highest expectations. Therefore, you should be knowledgeable about proper etiquette.” Instead, she shared an example that had a lasting impact and everyone could relate to the moral of the story. I related to it and here I am, sharing the story years later.

It is a fact, people love stories—the worldwide infatuation with motion pictures (a \$26 billion industry) proves it. Stories create a connection with someone and something, including your company culture.

The companies we work for provide us the settings and plots for some of the best experiences in our lives—the good, the bad, and even sometimes the ugly. Each company culture has a story. So, discover your organization’s stories. What is being shared with people on the outside? Is it good, bad, fun or harmful? You may find that your organization is not known for having any stories and that may be telling.

Whatever the result, tell people a good story about your organization—prospective employees are always listening. ■

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Timothy Geisert brings creative flair and marketplace savvy to Kenexa’s marketing communications efforts. His extensive experience in advertising serves him well as he leads Kenexa’s communications team charged with creating and implementing the company’s overall marketing strategy. He also has a strong knowledge of the human capital management industry, having served as Vice President of Sales for Recruitment Process Outsourcing and Employment Branding Practices at Kenexa from 2007-2010. Before he joined Kenexa, Mr. Geisert served as Chief Marketing Officer at Bailey Lauerman, a nationally recognized independent marketing communications firm. He also served as Vice President, Account Management from 1995 to 2000 at The Martin Agency, which consistently ranked as one of the top 10 most-awarded creative agencies in the country. During his career, Mr. Geisert has worked with some of the most recognized global organizations including Disney, Bayer AG and Union Pacific Railroad.