

Got Campfire?

The Paleolithic Power of Good Storytelling

Perhaps it goes back to the days when prehistoric people would sit around a fire on dark nights, sharing their oral history...or maybe it's the memory of ghost tales on campouts.

Whatever the reason, *we all love stories.*

And the surest way to get someone's attention – whether they're a loyal customer or a skeptical prospect – is to tell them a story.

All the best teachers know this: if you can entertain while you inform, your message is understood and remembered at a level that most other techniques don't touch.

And one of the best things about e-mail newsletters is that you have the opportunity to do exactly this. Tell your readers a story – preferably with someone like them in the lead role – and you've got them hanging on your words.

Here's another twist: if you can tell the story *in their own language*, you've not only put them in the lead role, but you've proven that you're one of their select group.

Create an unforgettable storytelling persona for yourself, and you've just become the bright spot in their day: someone who understands them, speaks to them where they are, and gives them a smile at regular intervals.

I used to be an engineer, so I know how to talk to engineers. If you used to work in an art studio, then you know how to talk to art people. If you used to be a car mechanic, then you know how to talk to car mechanics. Whatever your skill, whatever your professional language, that's the biggest gift that you have in terms of communicating with your market.

You can understand and talk to people who are like you.

■ Electronics and The Tale of the Heroic Engineer

I write the e-mail newsletter for my client, **B&B** Electronics, who sells industrial communication hardware. They sell the kinds of geek products that most people would consider very boring.

Their e-mail newsletter has tens of thousands of subscribers, and it's turned into one of the most important tools in their business. It's one of the reasons why their business is growing very aggressively.

Now, some of the people getting the newsletter are customers, some of them are prospects, some of them are barely even prospects. There's no way to predict what these people are going to need or buy next month.

So what's the purpose of this newsletter?

Well, it does encourage them to buy something today, and every time we send it out, people do buy things. But the primary purpose of this newsletter is to keep █████ present in their world and to get them to think about us every time they have a data communication problem.

So we mix education with entertainment, and we mix that content with interesting new products. And one of the strongest approaches we use is...(drum roll, please)...storytelling.

“The Joy of 60Hz A/C Power”

That was the title of one of our issues. As you can see, it's kind of wacky...the sort of wackiness that only an engineer can appreciate. Where did it come from?

It was an amalgamation of my own experience and Mike's. Actually, I had a job interview at the utility company – an interview that almost put me to sleep – and a suspicion that pumping out 60Hz AC power all day every day is actually a pretty boring enterprise.

All engineers know what 60Hz AC power is. No spammer would ever come up with a headline like that, and putting “Joy” on the front of that subject line makes opening this e-mail almost irresistible.

Civilization Depends on the World's Most Boring Human

█████ had an application story from a utility company, which was actually quite good, but I never feel safe assuming that even engineers will slog their way through an application story. So I turned the “boring” nature of █████'s business on its head and turned the boredom itself into a theme.

Here's the story that resulted.

Subject: The Joy of 60Hz AC Power

Date: July 23, 2004

When I was in college, I had this Job interview at an electric utility company. The guy who interviewed me had the personality of a turnip.

Like, no personality at all. Zero.

My eyes grew heavy. His voice started getting far away. I began to slip into dreamland. I nearly fell asleep, just listening to him describe the wonderful department he worked in.
You never want to fall asleep in a job interview.

Late that night, I lay awake pondering... what could cause this man to be so monotone, so featureless, so completely... blah?

Suddenly it hit me: This man listens to 60 Hz transformers humming day and night. 'Round the clock, 24/7. It's his job to keep that sixty cycles per second going, 365 days a year, without fail, so that our toasters and microwave ovens keep toasting toast and popping popcorn. So that our Tivos faithfully record episodes of Three's Company while we're watching Seinfeld reruns.

Indeed, this 60Hz AC power is the very bedrock of civilization itself. Should that power ever fail, we'll be plunged into the dark ages again, with chaos, bedlam, looting and riots.

And if the 60Hz hum ever stops, it's HIS neck on the guillotine blade.

Well, I didn't take that job. I took this job instead. Designing these networking gizmos and what not here at [REDACTED] Electronics.

So the other day we got this call. It's a guy named Matt from a power utility. Matt is another one of the loyal servants of mankind who keep the transformers humming.

Matt wanted to talk about his substations.

Matt liked his 60Hz but what he was not too enamored with was the 1200 Baud. That's the speed at which the substations' RTU communicated with the computer system in the Mother Ship.

Plus, Matt's crew was making 2-3 trips a week to the substations to reprogram breaker settings and retrieve history logs - sometimes in blizzard conditions. Semis might be jackknifed on the highway. Lovers might be separated. But Matt had a duty to mankind which his team never failed to fulfill.

You probably don't know that most of those big high-tension power lines have fiber optic cables on 'em? The substation has two Single Mode Fiber Optic Cables coming in from headquarters.

Matt replaced the expensive RTU and 1200 baud with a high speed LAN and a simple terminal server box. Not only does he get the usual monitoring of voltages, currents, breaker status, power usage, transformer temperature, etc., but he can reprogram devices and bring back history reports that the original SCADA system didn't support.

He doesn't have to make these trips anymore. Semis may be jackknifed on the highway and lovers may be separated, but engineers can reprogram devices and retrieve data from their offices. Reports show millisecond by millisecond data during fault conditions, and an Automated Meter Reading System collects data for the billing computer.

The magic is achieved with a surprisingly simple array of DIN Rail mount devices from our catalog....

My newfound curiosity about power distribution led me to call Dave, an old college buddy who chose Power as his field. Dave always gets a bit miffed when I poke fun at his life where the definition of high frequency is 61 Hz and low frequency is 59.

So I said to Dave: "So really, this power distribution stuff isn't really as boring as it sounds - you guys actually do some pretty cool networking and data acquisition tricks, huh?"

Dave sez to me, "This stuff IS interesting. But Mike," he says, an alienated man yearning to be understood, "The 60Hz transformer hum IS interesting too."

Huh?

Trying to be open minded, I asked him to explain.

"You make it sound so...one dimensional, and it's just not that way. There's 4160 volts... there's 13,800 volts, 35,000 volts, 115,000 volts and even 345,000 volts.

"There's not one phase, there's three. There's phase to phase, and phase to ground. I'm telling you, transformer hums come in all shapes and sizes.

"And it's not even confined to 60Hz. All those transformers have half-wave rectification effects and hysteresis, which makes an infinite series of harmonics - 120 Hz, 180 Hz, 240, 300, 360 - a Fourier series. Inside those humming transformers is a complex world of voltages, harmonics, and deadly chemicals."

He sure showed me. I just wish the guy had explained all this at my job interview. Had I understood this, I would never have accused him of having the personality of a turnip.

I am now enlightened.

So... Let it be known that here at [REDACTED] Electronics, we think ALL of our customers are exciting. Yes - even the guys who keep the transformers humming.

Happy connections,

Any engineers who've been told regularly that their jobs are boring and impossible to understand are going to read this story and get a big chuckle because, in the end, the engineer is the hero.

And so, the *customer* is the hero. That's the key. And then the newsletter gives them product links, and they can look at the new products and see what they like.

This is typical of the e-mails I write for [REDACTED]: they always revolve around an external theme. Sometimes it's a popular movie or song; recently it was the hurricanes in Florida.

One time it was power spikes and lightning strikes, so the subject was "Poltergeist in Chicago." This last winter it was "Our Dysfunctional Christmas at [REDACTED]."

Your E-Mail's Highest Purpose

So what are the secrets of this newsletter's success? Well, we always make sure it's entertaining. We always make sure there's something funny in it, and it's usually weird engineer humor. And we always make sure that we inform them about technical stuff. And we always make sure we have links to some products, and so people know what's going on.

And here's what we don't do: we *never* try to push anything.

Now, sometimes you do need to push a product. Sometimes you do need to give people a kick in the backside and tell them to buy something. But this customer has a thousand different things in their catalogue. There's no way that everybody could need that today.

So what happens if I get in a panic at the end of the month and I say, "Hey, we've got to increase our sales. Let's have a sale and let's send out an e-mail to everybody!"?

We might get a few short-term sales, but we'd end up annoying everybody, and that's the last thing we want to do. We want each issue of the newsletter to make people look forward to reading the next one.

The highest purpose of the e-mail you send today is to leave them eager to read your next e-mail tomorrow, or the next day, or next week, or next month.

Raves: 20 Questions: 10 Rants: 2

Every time we send out that newsletter, maybe ten or twenty people write back and say, "You know what, Mike? I always enjoy reading your newsletter. It's the only commercial newsletter that I always read every time an issue comes."

We usually also get five or ten or twenty that say, "Hey Mike, I got this widget made by Acme Corporation. I got this other gadget and I'm trying to hook them together. How do you do that?"

And those messages get forwarded to Tech Support, and Tech Support answers the questions, and maybe sells the person something in the process.

And then we get one or two from cranky people. Like one guy who was upset about a little joke about Martha Stewart's getting out of jail that week and returning to her 148-acre estate and her \$900,000 a year salary.

The subject line was: "Me, Martha Stewart and the Manufacturing Mosh Pit".

He wrote in saying, "I'm an engineer and I don't need this kind of stuff. Take me off your list."

We always get one or two e-mails from cranky people who don't like the topic, or don't get it, or think Mike belongs in an asylum.

Win by Being Edgy

No sane person would ignore all the people that say, "Wow, Mike. I love your newsletter. This is the only commercial newsletter that I actually read every time I get it."

But most corporations *would* ignore the 20 raves, and listen to the two rants.

And then they'd dumb it down and take out all the emotion, make it read like a press release or sound like a commercial, and soon the only feedback you'd get would be "Take me off your list." Or, worse than that, people might not unsubscribe, but just delete your messages or put you on their blacklist. And you'd never even know.

We *deliberately* make this newsletter edgy and emotional. Sometimes it's even a little political, and whoa, then we really get responses.

But it works!

People like that edge, it keeps them reading. And as a result, we've cultivated a responsive market among the engineers in [REDACTED]. There is no audience more conservative than that. This is the power of personality marketing.

It would be a *big mistake* to pay attention to that tiny handful of disgruntled people. Don't let a fringe minority of critics neuter your personality-laden newsletter with their unhappiness! Just unsubscribe them and move on.

The people who matter are the ones who *like* you.

Be the Bright Spot in Some Poor Sap's Bad Day

I ghostwrite the newsletter for Mike, with a zany persona, and people respond to that personality. When he's at a trade show people come to the booth and say, "Hey, who's that wiseass that sends out all these e-mails?"

And all the guys point at him: “Oh, that’s Mike.” And the visitors say, “Well, you’re kind of a crazy guy, but I always get a chuckle.”

And then they buy something.

It just proves how powerful e-mail is, even if you can’t bang people on the head and tell them to buy something. Even if immediate sales are not what you’re trying to accomplish. Even if you’re just trying to build a relationship or flaunt a little bit of zany personality.

Think of it like this. Can you send your customers an e-mail that’s going to brighten their day in the middle of all the other zombie-mail they get?

Their boss is yelling at them, or somebody’s not paying their check on their expense report, or their project is late, and all these stupid, annoying, everyday things are happening. Can you brighten up their day with something that they would enjoy? That’s really what you’re trying to do here.

Now, of course, you can definitely sell. But if you’re going to sell, you should take them to a sales page on a website rather than trying to do the selling in the e-mail.

Think of the e-mail as a lift letter that teases them to go on and click on a link.

This is an example of an e-mail formula that works. And it’s one of the reasons why **Electronics** is growing very aggressively in a market that’s actually shrinking. Manufacturing in the U.S. and Europe is not growing. It’s moving to China, very slowly.

But **’s** little market segment is growing. They’re selling more and more. They’re sending out more of their catalogues.

And it’s because they put personality into what they do, even though they have what is categorically a terribly boring product.

Next: Mastering the Laser List

To get the best response, your e-mail needs to be directed to the best, most receptive audience possible.

How do you qualify your audiences? Well, obviously you can pre-qualify them with targeted advertising and mailing lists. But beyond that, you can get your audience to qualify itself very effectively, again and again, at increasing levels of commitment each time.

How? That’s the topic of the next chapter, where we look at how you can aim sub-lists unerringly toward your most responsive readers.