

Venture Tales: Practical Strategies Underpinning Entrepreneurial Stories

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Stories are key to entrepreneurial success. Within entrepreneurship, an effective story generates meaning, captivates listeners, and conveys a message that resonates. But what strategies can entrepreneurs use to shape effective venture tales? We investigate these strategies here.

Entrepreneurs must convince a broad audience to support an idea for a new business. Because these ideas are brand new, whether these ideas succeed is often unpredictable. Entrepreneurial success therefore entails the ability of entrepreneurs to convince a broad audience their idea can be successfully transformed into reality under conditions of uncertainty (Lounsbury & Glynn, 2001). Entrepreneurs construct stories to help reduce the perceived uncertainty of their ideas. These stories create meaning where none yet exists by providing a plausible explanation of a series of events that has occurred in the past, present, or future. Strategic storytelling hence enables entrepreneurs to shape their journeys and create a compelling case for what they are trying to do.

Research highlights entrepreneurs tell at least six types of stories: (1) stories of identity (Navis & Glynn, 2011), (2) stories of opportunities (Garud & Giuliani, 2013), (3) stories of a projected futures (Garud, Schildt, & Lant, 2013), (4) stories of reasons for failure (Mantere et al., 2013), (5) stories of pivots (McDonald & Gao, 2019), and (6) stories of acting resourcefully (Fisher, Neubert, & Burnell, 2021). Crafting these stories in ways that enable entrepreneurs to advance their ideas can provide an advantage for entrepreneurs because these stories are critical to making sense of the very messy process of new venture development. Thus, by failing to engage in storytelling strategically, entrepreneurs may not be able to convince potential stakeholders their idea could work. So, what strategies might entrepreneurs use to tell effective venture tales?

In this paper, we examine the storytelling strategies Alex Blumberg used within the podcast *Startup* when attempting to build his company, Gimlet Media. In this podcast, Blumberg chronicles his own journey starting a new venture that he ultimately sold to Spotify for over \$200 million. We specifically use the six stories identified in prior research above to code what strategies Blumberg used to tell effective stories during his entrepreneurial journey. Table 1 summarizes the strategies we found for telling each of the six entrepreneurial stories and corresponding episodes where the storytelling strategies can be found.

Effective identity stories (a) connect the dots between the opportunity to be pursued and the entrepreneur intending to pursue it, and (b) balance familiarity with distinctiveness. Effective opportunity stories (a) specify a market problem and (b) show the entrepreneur in the story created a unique solution to that problem. Effective projective stories (a) generate a sense of fear of missing out, or “FOMO,” but also (b) bound expectations in the case of failing to live up to these expectations. Effective failure narratives (a) describe reasons for failure and (b) convey a sense the entrepreneur in the story has learned. Effective pivot stories (a) justify the reasons for change and (b) re-affirm commitment to the original venture aims. Finally, effective resourcefulness stories (a) play up the significance of an obstacle and (b) portray the entrepreneur as creatively overcoming the obstacle. In sum, the above strategies constitute a strategic storytelling repertoire entrepreneurs can use to ultimately generate support for their ventures. Entrepreneurial success depends on telling compelling venture tales. We hope these strategies help to enable entrepreneurial success.

TABLE 1. The Entrepreneurial Storytelling Repertoire

Entrepreneurial Story	Story Definition	Storytelling Strategy	Description	Example(s) in Startup Podcast
1. Identity	Stories around the founders and venture that gives meaning to questions of “who we are” and “what we do.”	a. Connect the dots	Make explicit connections between the entrepreneur and opportunity.	Episode 1, Episode 5
		b. Balance familiarity and distinctiveness	Convey elements of the entrepreneur and opportunity that are both legitimate and unique, balancing the foreign and familiar.	Episode 3, Episode 6
2. Opportunity	Stories about emerging situations in which new goods, services, etc. could be introduced and sold for profit.	a. Discover problems	Portray the entrepreneur as an investigator finding a mystery.	Episode 1
		b. Create solutions	Convey the entrepreneur as a builder or creator of some brand-new thing.	Episode 2
3. Projective	Stories that plot a future series of events and connects how those events are expected to unfold.	a. Generate FOMO	Generate a sense of buzz and excitement about the opportunity by connecting the opportunity with larger market trends.	Episode 1, Episode 7
		b. Bound expectations	Set boundaries with expectations about the future with concrete details and tentative language.	Episode 6
4. Failure	Stories about an unexpected loss event that has occurred during venture development.	a. Describe reasons for the failure event	Explain why the failure event had occurred.	Episode 9
		b. Convey learning	Include content that shows the entrepreneur learned from the failure event.	Episode 2, Episode 9
5. Pivot	Stories about a strategic change in strategy or business model.	a. Justify change	Provide reasons and rationale for a proposed change.	Episode 8,
		b. Re-affirm commitment	Include language that re-affirms commitment to the larger venture aims.	Episode 7, Episode 9, Episode 11
6. Resourcefulness	A story of entrepreneurial action whereby the entrepreneur is presented as creatively overcoming an obstacle.	a. Highlight impediment significance	Make the impediment or obstacle seem scary or daunting.	Episode 12, entire podcast
		b. Portray creative action	Convey the entrepreneur confronting the impediment as acting in a novel and useful way to overcome the impediment.	Episode 11, Episode 13, entire podcast

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