

Everyone is a 'storyteller' these days

By [Stuart Rothgiesser](#)

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Recently, we lost out on a contract to a firm, apparently due to better pricing. When queried as to the winning firm's credentials, we were told that the successful party were former news show producers, and had described themselves on their website as "storytellers".



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'What next', I thought, 'commuters claiming to be professional drivers?'

Once I had digested the disappointment of not winning the contract, I came to a profound realisation: we need to do a better job of educating clients as to what constitutes best practice story work.

And that means being able to distinguish between story collecting and storytelling (the latter having become a catch-all buzzword these days).

Apples & Oranges: Story collection is not storytelling

Communications, marketing and PR agencies usually contract people who claim to be "storytellers" – production houses, freelance videographers, producers, copywriters, and spin masters – when what they are actually after are story collectors: anthropologists, researchers, and trained listeners.

These are the kind of people you can comfortably chat with at a pub or open up to while waiting in a queue.

They have the ability and skills to illicit stories from individuals, who, after sharing of themselves, feel a deep satisfaction and connection with the listener. Quite simply, professional story collectors harvest rich, textured tales that audiences can relate to as authentic and inspiring.

Story collection: Process driven

So, what makes for good story collection in the marketing/communications space? Personal story collection is a long and thorough process, much of it occurring before going out in the field.

The first part of this process is crucial to the outcome of the entire project – and this is where we spend most of the time.

We teach our clients what makes for a good story, what are different kinds of stories, and what kinds of stories (with what messaging) do they want to share from a strategic communications perspective.

We also help our clients see the role of storytelling as part of a large communications strategy - and how to locate personal stories at the heart of their campaigns.

Often, the client needs guidance in what makes for a story. Most of the time, clients have identified an anecdote or an experience in mind.

Thus, before going out in the field, our story collectors approach identified storyteller targets to research whether or not they have a real story to tell and what that story is.

Sometimes we will go back to clients and inform them that we need to go back to the drawing board; mostly, we find the story is different from what was originally thought.

Time, commitment and skill

As can be seen, it takes time and commitment to find a story. And more of the same is needed to collect the story.

For [Wesgro's Featured Achiever podcasts](#), we spent three hours with each of the storytellers – often in their homes and businesses.

To capture [Buzelwa's Story](#) (client: Oceana Group), we spent a full two days story collecting – much of it in Xhosa - over four locations.

And for Stellenbosch University's [HOPE Project Annual Report](#), we spent a week witnessing the effects of these wonderful programmes first hand – in township kindergartens and at prison plays.

Many established production companies are simply not committed to this timely and often arduous collection process.

And the process is the reverse to what traditional production houses are used to: the story (and hence the shoot locations, including sounds and scenes) only emerges while the story is being collected.

This means that not all logistics can be pre-planned, and crews have to be comfortable with operating “in the flow” – spontaneous and structured, fast and patient, clear and open.

The hidden ingredient

But it is not just time that makes for good story collection: A story collector must have an ear, empathy and genuine interest for human stories. They must be committed to listening for hours, guiding the storytellers, looking for clues, hearing silences, and finally finding the conflict, how the hero overcame it and the ensuing transformation.

Building rapport is essential to allowing the story tellers to trust us with their deepest hopes, fears and dreams.

To do all the above, a story collector must be trained so that their innate listening talent becomes a collection skill.

A further set of skills is required to transfer this 'data' into content that is appropriate for the medium – whether that be video, podcast, animation or print.

Story collectors need training to collate (“transcribe”) the story into a usable script for production purposes.

And, finally, they need to be trained in the ethics of story collecting.

Want to learn more?

Roth Communications is running its Africa-first Story Collectors: Level One Training in February. For more information, [click here](#).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Thanks to senior associate and story collector Andrew Fletcher Cole [[@MsterCole]] for help with editing this article.

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