

Tell a story when marketing, speaker tells Hills of Headwaters



Broadcaster Terry O'Reilly delivered the keynote address at the recent Partners in Tourism Summit, hosted by the Hills of Headwaters Tourism Association.

By Bill Rea

Effective marketing is really nothing more than story telling.

That was the main message broadcaster Terry O'Reilly had last Wednesday when he delivered the keynote address at the Partners in Tourism Summit, hosted by the Hills of Headwaters Tourism Association.

O'Reilly, who hosts CBC Radio's *Under the Influence*, said he received a lesson in this message a couple of years ago.

An editor with Random House asked if he would be interested in writing a book. He wanted to go about the project the way he does his weekly radio show, but without being hampered by the 27 minutes he's allowed, to help shoppers be better shoppers and consumers. The editor wasn't impressed, and O'Reilly later realized that was his fault.

"I hadn't told her a story," he said, adding he arranged for another meeting to try and correct that.

At that session, he told her the number of shark attacks on humans were at a five-year low, and marine biologists weren't able to explain it. Marketing experts were. They knew that because of the recession, there was a low in the number of people taking seaside vacations, meaning there were fewer opportunities for sharks to attack.

O'Reilly said he told her another story about a new ointment Johnson & Johnson came out with in the '50s and '60s that was advertised as painless. It drew no repeat sales.

"If we don't feel pain when we're being healed, we don't feel like we're being healed," he said.

The people at Johnson & Johnson solved the problem by adding a drop of alcohol to the ointment, and sales took off.

"Stories make people feel something," he said, pointing out it had an impact on the editor because she felt something. "Information alone rarely makes people take action."

O'Reilly observed that no one has studied human behaviour and what it takes to convince people more than those in the advertising industry. What has been learned is that people are more convinced by what gets to their hearts, as opposed to their heads.

"A great story is aimed at your heart," he commented, adding the heart makes decisions for people about 80 per cent of the time. Consequently, a lot of marketing efforts are aimed at the heart.

He told the story of an advertising agency in London, England, that was pushing for the British Rail account. Three well-dressed officials of the rail line showed up for a meeting at the agency's offices, and found the reception area cluttered and dirty with the staff less than welcoming. They also sat waiting for about 50 minutes. They were angrily getting up to leave when the firm's creative director finally came out and told them they had just gone through what their customers experience every day.

"That has got to be the biggest pitch gamble I ever heard in my life," O'Reilly said, adding it worked. These rail officials had to feel the message, and not just understand it.

He stressed that marketing can't just be about costs and information. He argued people tend to ignore vital information. They should have changed the batteries in their smoke detectors when they set their clocks ahead for Daylight time, but he said many don't do it.

O'Reilly also observed that people will remember a good story for years.

The Steinway piano company, during the first half of the last century, had a series of advertisements in which they showed one of their products, along with a picture of a prominent composer from the past, with the message; "Steinway: The instrument of the immortals."

A customer walked into the Steinway store in New York some years later, seeking to buy a piano. An advertising representative was in the store and asked what attracted the customer to Steinways, and he said it was an ad he saw 25 years before. It had taken him

this long to save enough money to buy one.

‘It shows you the power of story-telling,’ O’Reilly remarked. ‘A good story resounds for months and years and maybe for decades.’ Another example O’Reilly mentioned dealt with an idea he had some years ago for a screenplay dealing with a police story.

Preparation included him spending some time with a coroner.

The coroner started to explain his job by showing O’Reilly slides of crime scenes and getting his interpretations of them. He was consistently wrong.

‘I could start to see the world through his lense,’ O’Reilly said. ‘It was fascinating.’

He also saw a video of an autopsy, viewing it with a ‘clinical’ eye.

‘I was completely unmoved,’ he said, adding that changed when he started hearing details about the man who had died.

The victim had been working in a gravel pit and was suffocated under a pile of material, leaving behind a family, including three kids.

‘I started to care about the guy on the table,’ he said. ‘That’s how powerful stories are.’

If the story is good, the amount people are prepared to pay for an item can be impacted.

O’Reilly told the story of New York Times Magazine writer Rob Walker, who bought four mundane items from a flea market and put them up on eBay, after bringing in writers to compose stories about each item. An old meat thermometer, that cost about a dollar eventually sold for \$51 after it was accompanied by the words ‘my heart was a piece of hot meat pierced by this thermometer.’

He said one of the other items, a small wooden mallet that had only cost 33 cents sold for \$71.

Finding what to focus messages and stories on is important too.

O’Reilly mentioned that New York City was going through a very rough time around 1980. The City was broke, it had endured a garbage strike and crime rate, so tourism was at an all-time low. O’Reilly said Mayor Ed Koch, like all good marketers, started doing research on all aspects. Through focus groups, they learned people hated New York, but loved Broadway. That led to an ad campaign promoting Broadway as part of New York, which resulted in the famous ‘I Love New York’ campaign.

He said officials in New York realized their greatest area of opportunity was it was hard to get the Broadway without going through the rest of the city. ‘There’s only one Broadway, and it’s in New York,’ he observed.

‘It’s a story about discovery,’ he added, pointing out research showed them how to leverage Broadway. ‘Your greatest area of opportunity.’

O’Reilly also pointed out an area of opportunity can often be buried in details.

‘You just have to dig to find it,’ he said. ‘It is always there.’

He also warned against going in with preconceived notions.

‘Never assume you know what the problem is,’ he said, pointing out in focus groups they can bubble to the surface.

O’Reilly pointed out tourism in New York was hit after 9-11, so officials there used it a chance to return to that great area of opportunity, with lines like ‘Let’s go on with the show.’

‘It still works,’ he said.

There are also cases in which a negative story can work.

O’Reilly cited the example of the Hans Brinker Budget Hotel in Amsterdam, which has gained fame by billing itself as the worst hotel in the world, with such slogans as ‘Our maids work twice as hard, since we only have one.’

He pointed out that positioning themselves as the worst hotel let them leverage their best opportunity. ‘It put them on the map internationally,’ he observed, adding their bookings went from 45 per cent occupancy to 80 per cent in five years. ‘They (the customers) want to see how bad it really is.’

Referring to a campaign he worked on, O’Reilly mentioned that the Toronto Symphony Orchestra (TSO) was having problems because most of its subscribers were older than 65, with the numbers dropping every year. There were a lot of people in their 40s who liked classical music, but they weren’t attending performances.

O’Reilly was asked to come up with a radio campaign. He attended three performances and had a great time at each one.

He realized he was part of the target market, being the right age who liked, but didn’t love, classical music. He and his wife would go out every Thursday night, but they had never thought of going to a TSO concert.

He realized it would have been intimidating to a lot of people, with some being afraid of not being dressed properly, or applauding at the wrong time.

‘Fear of the TSO can be overcome,’ he said. ‘You should only be afraid you’ll miss it.’

‘I just thought it was a blue-blood place,’ he added. ‘It wasn’t that at all. My perception had kept me away.’

He added the campaign he came up with worked because it told a story that the audience could empathize with, without even trying

to sell the idea of classical music.

He also said it turned the TSO fortunes around.

?I say if the story's good, they will listen, and if it's not, they will not.?

He told the audience to keep things like his examples in mind with their marketing.

?These hills are alive with great story-tellers,? he said.