

Tech Go-to-Market: Embrace Authentic Storytelling That Links Capabilities With Business Value to Engage Technology Buyers

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Organizations use technology to achieve specific business outcomes, but product features often dominate spoken and written communications from TSPs. TSP marketers should move to a storytelling approach to capture interest and build trust.

Key Challenges

- The use of traditional messaging documents (such as messaging houses, brand communication guidelines or key message lists) to guide communications reinforces bad behavior, focusing on developing a long list of features and benefits without linking them to contextual stories, a common complaint from technology buyers.
- Developing strong storytelling skills can be difficult for technology and service provider (TSP) product marketers without training on specific storytelling structures.
- Shifting communications to more of a business value orientation is harder than it sounds, due to internal pressures and long-standing practices that cause a deep inside-out focus on capabilities and a desire to share every detail to convey how great the product is.

Recommendations

Product marketing leaders should:

- Move away from traditional messaging documents in favor of authentic, fact-based stories that are tailored to your buying audience and their buying process.
- Adopt the Situation-Impact-Resolution format to develop storytelling skills, using positioning to drive a level of consistency while developing specific stories for different buying roles and activity streams.
- Start with shorter stories, using a progressive engagement approach that communicates just-enough value to gain interest and makes the reader say or think "tell me more," and then guide them to additional more detailed content as they are ready for it.

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Introduction

Help Buyers Understand Your Value With Authentic Storytelling

Authentic storytelling is the path that TSPs can take to connect product and service capabilities to business outcomes that clients care about. When we say "storytelling," we are not talking about "tall tales around the campfire" or fictional stories filled with inflated claims that cannot be proven. Instead, we are talking about an approach that uses facts and provable statements in an engaging format that builds interest (causing readers/listeners to say or think "tell me more"), establishes context, conveys emotion and closes with a positive outcome.

TSP product marketing leaders play a key role in developing and sharing stories across the organization. This research is designed to help improve their ability to use communications to engage customers about their products and services (called "products" for the rest of this research).

Today's Situation — It's All About the Product

Buyers tell us that they often have a hard time understanding the differences between the products of various TSPs. In a 2015 survey of 211 technology buyers, only 31% of the respondents felt TSPs were effective at differentiating themselves from the competition.¹ When Gartner asked why, the strongest reasons cited were that messages sound the same, product features and functionality are too similar, and that it is hard to gauge product or service quality. Similarly, when asked if they agree with the statement "providers do a good job of communicating the business value (outcomes) that their technology and service provide," the average score from respondents was low (see "Tech Go-to-Market: Differentiation Challenges Continue to Plague Tech Providers").

The cause of this situation is natural, and so it will require effort to make adjustments. TSPs invest a tremendous amount of time, money and emotion in the development of their products. Products are the focus of their world. As a result, they have a deep desire to have customers understand and embrace their products, so they want to tell people all about them. Communications center on product capabilities first, with some effort to link them to benefits (but often Gartner sees feature and benefit lists that are blended — that is, features are listed as benefits, and benefits are listed as features).

In an effort to improve the communication of business value, product marketing leaders use "standard messaging documents" (these may be called "messaging houses," "brand communication guidelines," "communications guides" or other terms) to create organized lists of features and benefits. More advanced TSPs augment these "tools" with personas and "pain lists" to increase the focus on the customer. But time after time, we see these documents used for a few months only to be quickly ignored, allowed to become out of date, and ultimately to be forgotten.

This "standard messaging" approach often fails because it reinforces the inside-out view. The focus is to "make sure the buyer understands everything about the product, regardless of its specific value to them." This typically results in longer and longer lists of hard-to-remember features that are difficult to connect with specific customer business needs.

The Impact — Buyer Frustration, Provider Consternation

As a result of these problems, buyers get frustrated. Instead of considering new TSPs (which may have a great product for their situation), they simply choose a trusted brand, because they feel like they know what that brand represents.

Or they halt their buying process. In a 2014 survey of 700 technology buyers worldwide, Gartner learned that two of the top three factors for halting a buying process were concerns over potential ROI and concerns about business and technical risk (the third was project costs exceeding budgets).² Effectively, they were struggling to connect solution proposals to their ability to have successful projects.

For product marketing leaders, this also leads to not only frustration, but also consternation. They are confident their product is valuable, but struggle to understand why buyers don't get it. The most common reaction: continue to add more features to try to make the product better.

The Resolution — Authentic Storytelling

The path to follow to change these dynamics is authentic storytelling. In the same survey referenced above on differentiation, respondents strongly indicated that "we don't trust providers who make bold claims without backing it up with customer stories."³ Furthermore, when we asked buyers in 2014 what type of content they value the most from TSPs, customer case studies was ranked much higher than product data sheets.⁴

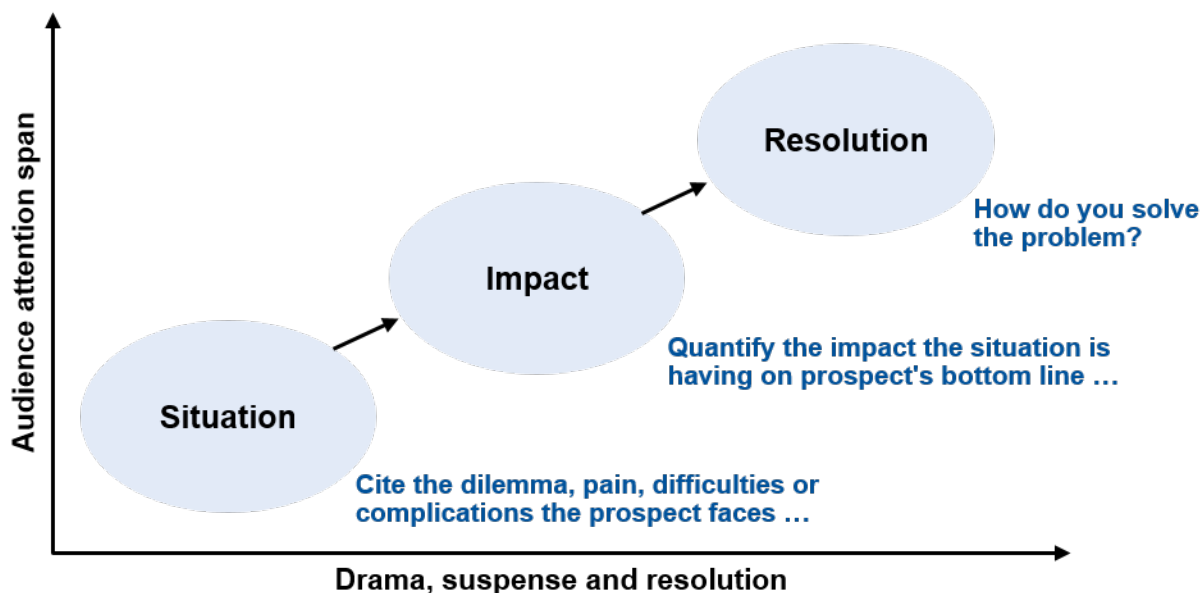
While case studies are an ideal use case for storytelling, storytelling approaches can be used as a basis for almost every form of communication, including analyst and investor presentations, white papers, videos, sales presentations, company overviews, and even product briefs. These stories don't necessarily replace all of the great, detailed product information that TSPs have created. Instead, they become the introduction to those materials — gaining the interest of buyers first, who then have the context and desire to learn about your product features and how the product will help them achieve the outcomes they learned about from your stories.

TSPs that have started on this path to improve their storytelling have told Gartner that they are experiencing better results from their marketing efforts, faster engagement with prospects and increased confidence across their organization.

A Path to Improving Storytelling

In the previous section, this research has actually shown you an example of storytelling (we hope that most of you like it — different people like different stories). It illustrates a standard structure, called Situation-Impact-Resolution (SIR), which Gartner recommends that TSPs adopt to build storytelling skills (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Standard SIR Storytelling Format



Source: Gartner (July 2016)

The rest of this research will explore the structure and other practices to follow for product marketing leaders to embrace storytelling, improve their skills, and develop authentic, emotional stories that improve their business. Beyond a desire for general improvement, key initiatives that demand great stories include new product launches, geographic expansion, embracing a new sales strategy (particularly one that involves partners), increased vertical focus, or other efforts to transform or innovate with regard to the value you provide to customers.

Analysis

A Standardized Format Makes It Easier for Anyone to Create Interesting Stories

The struggle to create compelling content is consistently repeated during client engagements and primary research. The issues consistently manifest in the same pattern: limited focus on business value, long lists of features and details, and the lack of clear, believable comparisons. While there is close to universal agreement that storytelling is effective, many product marketing leaders feel they are not natural storytellers or are not sure how to do it, so they revert to existing approaches — they talk about their product capabilities.

Gartner has found that standardizing the approach to storytelling makes adoption and improvement easier. Rather than trying to create many different story formats, start with one — a universal format that has been proven effective in a wide variety of situations for years and years. The format is called **SIR** — Situation-Impact-Resolution. It provides a structure that guides your audience toward

a more engaged experience. When using SIR today, you need to add one additional component — a strong opening to capture the reader's interest quickly. This is illustrated below with an example of applying it using a search technology company that sells to businesses running e-commerce sites.

- **Open with outcome** — Open with a short, catchy outcome-oriented headline or sentence that establishes the value and the context for how that value is achieved. This effectively foreshadows the rest of the story, causing the reader/listener to think, "I want to know more."
Example: "Get at least 10% more of the people who visit your e-commerce site to complete a purchase through improved search."
- **Capture the current situation** — Describe the situation before your product or service is used. What is the problem that buyers are experiencing? The situation section is critical as it establishes context and creates an environment where the buyer can agree with you. ("Yes, our business has experienced that.") If they can't relate to the situation, then they are not likely to be a legitimate prospect. Use the situation to put your buyers in the story; this is about them and their world, not you.
Example: "A significant percentage of visitors to e-commerce sites can't find what they are looking for. In many cases, someone using the search function is even less likely to complete a purchase than someone who does not."
- **Describe the impact** — While many TSPs do a decent job of describing the situation, most omit being clear about the impact. The impact is the clear articulation of the pain, cost or risk that the current situation is causing. Without impact, you are hoping that the buyers will either already know the impact or make the connection on their own. While this can happen, when buyers are inundated with information, the likelihood of that happening diminishes. Being clear on the impact helps the buyer think, "Yes, this is a problem I need to solve sooner rather than later." **Example:** "As a result, our customers tell us that approximately 25% or more of visitors that come to their sites with an intent to make a purchase, don't."
- **Show a resolution** — Now that you have buyers agreeing with you and feeling the pain of the current situation, you can move them to a better place, by describing how your product or service resolves the problem. As part of the resolution, address the key issues that are being confronted in "the old way" and how your way is improved. As part of your resolution, reinforce the outcome that you opened with, completing the full arc of the story. As you get to the resolution, you are creating an environment where the buyer, if interested, will want to learn more. This is the opening to link your product features to the value you can provide (but save those details for later — once the buyer asks "tell me more").
Example: "We provide a search engine that is optimized for e-commerce. It uses a combination of technologies, including past purchase behavior, to deliver better search results. Our clients report that they have achieved a 10% or higher increase in the percentage of visitors that actually buy with the help of our product."

The format creates a discipline that establishes context and helps your customers see themselves within the story. They see how they can become the protagonist. It is a story about their world, their problems and their opportunities. You can use this format for many, many types of stories and many different story lengths (from a single paragraph — as the example above shows — to multiple pages). When building stories, shorter is usually better, but as technology buyers' interest grows, they want more detail. Be prepared to give it to them.

Use Positioning to Guide the Story Development

In order to tell great stories, a standardized format is not enough; you need some building blocks. Positioning provides many of those building blocks (see "Tech Go-to-Market: Positioning Revisited"). Developing and sharing a strong positioning framework across your company provides the information to guide storyline development. It provides clarity of the needs and wants that you address; the compelling reason to buy your product or service; and the competitive alternatives and your differentiation. These elements effectively map to various aspects of the storytelling format:

- Needs and wants and competitive alternatives are all part of the situation.
- Compelling reason to buy can be used for the outcome opening and the resolution.
- Differentiation should be used in the resolution.

The core elements of your positioning should be emphasized and repeated (possibly in different contexts) in as many of your stories as possible. This will help customers remember you and what you stand for. Consistency is important to help customers retain information and remember you.

Create Different Stories Based on the Buying Personas and Activity Streams

To engage customers, TSPs need many different stories. Technology buying is typically done by teams, so TSPs will need different stories (think of it as a collection of short stories — they need to hang together, but have differences) for different members of the buying team (a technical buyer cares about different things than the financial buyer). Additionally, the story is different for different buying cycle activity streams (see "Tech Go-to-Market: The B2B Customer Life Cycle for Technology Products and Services"). See Table 1 for building stories for buying cycle activity streams.

Table 1. Building Stories for Buying Cycle Activity Streams

Buying Cycle Activity Stream	Focus of Story	Key Points of Emphasis
Exploring	The reason to make a change	Business outcomes compared with current approaches
Evaluating	How you enable change	Comparing the approach your product enables versus alternatives
Engaging	How you work with clients	Guidance on how you help clients achieve value

Source: Gartner (July 2016)

As you build content, be sure to also map the target persona, or personas (see "Tech Go-to-Market: Creating Personas for Business Buyers"), that the stories are most appealing to. A story on how your product integrates with other technologies is likely to be more important to a technical persona, who might be influencing the buying decision rather than making it. Conversely, stories about potential business impact are often ideal for decision makers. Assess if you have content and

stories for every persona based on the persona's role in decision making and the areas of the buying cycle that the persona is involved in.

Use Customer Stories to Build Trust and Quantify the Impact Whenever Possible

The one downside of "storytelling" is that some view the term as equivalent to lying. As a child, if you "told stories," it was associated with making things up. Great village storytellers were either revered for capturing the history of their towns or reviled for exaggerating. In the business world, storytelling must be authentic. If you can't back up a claim, don't make it. Authenticity builds trust.

The best path to authenticity is through real examples — the stories of your customers or your company. These examples are another key building block of successful storytelling. For emerging TSPs, you may not have a lot of customer stories to start with. But you have yourselves. It is hard to imagine anyone starting a business or building a product without having identified a problem (the situation) that needed to be solved. Tell the story of why you decided to solve the problem. Once you have customers, share the stories of their success. Once you have a healthy base of customers, make sure that their stories dominate your communications.

As you think about options for case studies (see "Tech Go-To-Market: Crafting Case Studies to Win Business"), you can create them targeted to each of the activity streams and to different buying team members. Be conscious of that as you develop the stories. Target the message and guide buyers to the right story at the right time. Avoid case studies that have "a little bit for everyone" (see Table 2).

Table 2. Case Study Storyline Examples

Storyline Focus	Primary/Secondary Audience	Activity Stream
The business outcomes Acme achieved with your product	Business sponsors/decision makers	Exploring
Why Acme chose your product versus others (high level)	Business sponsors/decision makers	Evaluating
Why Acme chose your product versus others (technical)	Technical influencers	Evaluating
How Acme achieved value (business perspective)	Decision makers/business sponsors	Engaging
How Acme implemented product successfully	Technical influencers	Engaging

Source: Gartner (July 2016)

Quantifiable impact makes authentic stories even more believable. If you can attach values to specific situations and outcomes — then readers will be more inclined to believe — particularly when linked to customer examples. For example, saying, "The old process could take as long as six months and nearly always had at least three errors to correct along the way. Since using our solution, the process takes an average of three days to complete and they have experienced no errors along the way" is more impactful and believable than "Our system reduced process time by more than 90%."

The last example points to the risk of really big numbers. They are hard to believe. If your product can have a huge impact, you will almost always need customer stories and brand advocates to make that impact believable. Alternatively, you will have to break down how the impact is achieved through detailed comparisons.

Emotion Makes Stories More Memorable and Shareable

One of the most important benefits of storytelling is that it creates an environment for emotional connections. The human brain uses emotions and previous experiences to remember. This may be the biggest reason for moving to stories. When we give buyers lists of features or facts to remember, quite simply, they don't. Studies have shown that most people can keep only three to five "items" in the working memory of the brain.⁵ So, when presented with long lists, they either forget them all, hopefully remembering that the list exists, or only remember the first few or last few items.

Dr. Jonah Berger, of The Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania, conducted research for his book, "Contagious: Why Things Catch On," which found that specific emotions created an increased likelihood of stories being shared. Specifically, stories that sparked emotions that caused arousal (such as anger, anxiety, awe, excitement and amusement) were more likely to be shared than more passive emotions (contentment and sadness).⁶ Keep this in mind as you build your stories. When possible, incorporate the ideas of unfairness into your "situation" segment. (For example, "IT administrators are often put between a rock and a hard place, with users demanding immediate response and security managers wanting detailed audit trails. Satisfying both parties using today's tools is not possible. It just isn't fair.") Then use the idea of creating awe in your resolution section. (Example: "Our customers tell us that the users now view them as heroes; one of our users said, 'They tell us that we respond faster than they ever expected and with even more effective solutions. We can't imagine how we ever survived without your solution. I tell everyone I can about it.'")

Recognize the Importance of Progressive Engagement

When working on stories, remember that you don't have to tell everything at once. In fact, if you try to, buyers will be overwhelmed and are likely to disengage. Instead, think "progressive engagement." Like the outcome opening for the SIR approach, the goal of progressive engagement is to communicate enough for customers to easily understand and, most importantly, cause them to say or think "tell me more." Then you guide them to additional stories or materials. This is where much of your existing content can be used. Once you have customers believing you can help them, they'll want you to prove it. While customer stories help, this is more personal. They'll want demonstrations of real products, tailored to their situation. They'll be ready for your feature lists, having the context to understand the value they provide. Make sure you don't break the link that you have established. Help customers understand how product features enable specific outcomes and support business initiatives. Maintaining the context you have built helps customers remember and understand.

A progressive engagement approach recognizes that customers are overwhelmed by too much information and too little time. Showing respect for this situation by earning their interest to learn more is a key part of improving and simplifying the buying experience.

Tell the Right Stories

Once you have a library of stories, it is critical to make sure you are telling the right ones at the right times. Don't tell stories your specific customers don't care about. Through segmentation, a product marketing leader can identify the target customers that will have a shared set of needs (see "Tech Go-to-Market: A Practical Guide to Market Segmentation"). Build stories for them.

But no two customers are exactly the same, so as the sales teams that you enable use the stories to engage with prospects, help them understand how to choose the right ones. This requires buyer understanding. Train your sales team on techniques to uncover key business initiatives that buying organizations are focused on and use stories that link to them. Work with buyers to understand where they are in the buying process, and choose stories that address the activity stream they are focused on. Tell customer stories from others in similar industries or with similar business pains and goals. And prepare your teams to tailor the messaging to specific situations (see "Tech Go-to-Market: Use Situational Messaging for Improved Customer Engagements During the Buying Cycle").

Ultimately, your stories are not about you. They are about your customers and your potential customers. Make sure you focus on what they want and need to hear versus what you think you want to tell them, and you will see the benefits of the increased engagement, improved understanding and deeper connections that storytelling enables.

Gartner Recommended Reading

Some documents may not be available as part of your current Gartner subscription.

"Tech Go-to-Market: Differentiation Challenges Continue to Plague Tech Providers"

"Tech Go-to-Market: Positioning Revisited"

"Tech Go-to-Market: The B2B Customer Life Cycle for Technology Products and Services"

"Tech Go-to-Market: A Practical Guide to Market Segmentation"

"Tech Go-to-Market: Trust Drives the B2B Technology Buying Cycle"

"Tech Go-to-Market: Common Messaging Mistakes and How to Avoid Them"

Evidence

For this document, we drew on the hundreds of inquiries we receive every year from providers looking to improve their messaging.

¹ Gartner conducted a study in 3Q15 among Gartner Research Circle Members — a Gartner-managed panel composed of IT and business leaders. In all, 426 respondents participated in the survey that covered four areas: basic IT and business economics, IT cost optimization, digital workplace, and vendor differentiation. The vendor differentiation section was completed by 211 respondents. Organizations surveyed are regionally concentrated in North America, Latin America, EMEA and Asia/Pacific and are distributed across industries, with mean annual revenue of \$3.642 billion. The survey was developed collaboratively by a team of Gartner analysts and was reviewed, tested and administered by Gartner's Research Data and Analytics team.

For this first reference, buyers were asked to rank the effectiveness of most IT providers in differentiating themselves from the competition on a scale of 1 (not at all effective) to 7 (extremely effective). The 31% cited reflects buyers providing a score of 5 (26%), 6 (4%) or 7 (1%).

² Gartner conducted a study in July 2014; 700 respondents (200 in the U.S.; 100 each in the U.K., India, China and Brazil; and 50 each in France and Germany) were interviewed online. Respondent organizations with more than 100 employees were surveyed. Seventy percent were in organizations of 1,000 or more employees. Respondents were involved in IT purchase decisions, infrastructure hardware or software, application software installed on-premises or run from the cloud, outsourced services, infrastructure as a service/platform as a service (IaaS/PaaS), or professional services. Respondents were asked about providers' marketing and sales activities and the impact on the decision to purchase at different stages of the buying cycle (exploration, evaluation and engagement).

³ This is from the same survey referenced in Footnote No. 1. The respondents were asked to rate their level of agreement (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree) with the statement "We don't trust providers who make bold claims without backing it up with customer stories." Eighty percent responded with a score of 5, 6 or 7, indicating a high level of agreement with the statement.

⁴ This is from the same survey as referenced in Footnote No. 2.

⁵ N. Cowan. ["The Magical Mystery Four: How Is Working Memory Capacity Limited, and Why?"](#) National Center for Biotechnology Information. 4 May 2010.

⁶ J. Berger. "Contagious: Why Things Catch On." Simon and Schuster. 2013.

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