The Knowledge Project Keypoints — Marketing, Sales & Storytelling

The Knowledge Project Keypoints

Episodes in this pack: 7

$1 Billion in 365 Days: The Habits of an Elite Closer

Guest: Ryan Serhant
Date: 2026-10-13 · Duration: 0:55:32
URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xr7tUPuc7xA

KEYPOINTS

- **Don't 'fake it till you make it'—act now as the person you will verifiably be in 12–24 months.**
  He rejects the phrase because it implies lying, and in sales 'everything sounds great until someone lies to your face.' Instead: write down who you'll be in one to two years and behave like that person today. You rarely become exactly that version, but you become 'some alternate reality version' of it. He now runs this with his daughter, agents and staff.
- **Embarrassment, not failure, is the modern career killer—people willing to look foolish make more money.**
  He argues social-media natives have normalised failure but are '100,000% afraid of embarrassment,' so they won't talk to 100 people to meet five. Theatre gave him memorisation and diaphragm breathing—selling isn't acting, 'but it's the same muscle'—so he strongly recommends improv for agents. Bad comments are fine; worry when people stop talking about you.
- **Treat your ~1,000 productive minutes a day as cash, and don't hand the rest of the wallet to whoever stole five.**
  Of 1,440 daily minutes, about 1,000 are usable. If someone grabbed $5 from your $1,000 you wouldn't hand over the rest, yet people let one bad five-minute call wreck an afternoon. He split days into find, keep and do business, cut meetings to 15–30 minutes and lived in 15-minute blocks—done humbly, never 'I have 14 minutes, go.'
- **The best sale is no sale: people hate being sold but love shopping, so sell the dream before the bed.**
  Open with the 'two C's': a compliment to disarm and something in common (the street, a job, a star sign). Then the 'question game': never ask anything answerable with no, and let people talk. Discuss everything but the sale, yet set expectations and next steps (his 'CODO', close on day one) so you don't just make a friend. Weak sellers pitch the bed; strong ones sell the dream first.
- **Follow up, follow through, follow back—forever, until people buy, die, or tell you to stop.**
  Follow up until there's an outcome, follow through on every promise, follow back with everyone who chose you. His follow-ups are personal notes every other week—market news, a listing, a sale—never an ask. Not a 100% hit rate, but 'far greater than the not.' Quitting is easy; trying is harder 'but it's also free.'
- **Ego kills more deals, careers and relationships than anything; play for the other side to win.**
  In $20–100M deals, agent, buyer and seller egos collide. Over-communicate, 'kill bees with honey,' 'kudos them to death.' Outside true zero-sum contests, a deal only works if the counterparty wins too—even a bank in a short sale wins by clearing its books.
- **Distribution is the most valuable asset: content pulls, advertising pushes.**
  When Million Dollar Listing aired the phone didn't ring—nobody calls people they see on TV. What worked was 'content to community to commerce': Instagram from 2013 democratised luxury homes visually, then YouTube because reality TV aired after properties sold. By 2015–17 developers wrote clauses into listing agreements requiring tours on his personal YouTube. Ads push and must repeat endlessly; content and PR pull.
- **Hook 'em, help 'em, ask 'em: no one owes a stranger attention, so earn the right to ask.**
  Everyone already has friends, so first give a reason to know you (the hook), then help with something unrelated to you—an introduction, a discount, a hard-to-get table—before any ask. He says 60,000+ salespeople in 133 countries train on these frameworks, needed because many young people 'have no idea how to talk' off their phones.
- **Being pleased but never satisfied is both the engine and a cost borne by the people closest to you.**
  His wife told him on camera he used to be happy. He argues businesses that don't grow die as costs and taxes rise. After a $1B sales year and about $22M in commissions in 2019, he 'went to zero' to found a brokerage, and reframes his chip on the shoulder as 'pure brutal responsibility' to people who win when he wins.

EXAMPLES

- **The Million Dollar Listing audition: ~3,000 applicants down to 16, then four.**
  Living in a tiny studio and riding the subway, he asked who a casting director would want. He borrowed a Range Rover, had the LA crew meet him at 5am (2am their time) for shirtless boxing, showered in front of them to show he had no filter, had friends call nonstop, and cast an acting-class friend as an angry hedge funder. When a showing fell through, he copied a date who once walked out on him—claimed an emergency and drove off. They called the next day.
- **Five years of fortnightly notes, then $16M, $73M and $33M sales.**
  He met a wealthy prospect briefly in 2012 and wrote every other week until the man replied in late 2017—he had simply been busy. Google Alerts on names and companies gave him reasons to send a no-ask 'congrats, crushing it.'
- **The $8.3M 'con artist' deal that turned out real.**
  In 2011 a phone buyer offered $8M cash on an $8.5M listing, settled at $8.3M, then vanished. Months later an $830,000 deposit arrived from a bank in a dubious country; peers called it a laundering pattern. Serhant found his Paris address, flew over, drank tequila, got partial signatures, and later rode armoured Escalades to JFK while the buyer inspected a new plane. They closed in cash. The buyer's reason: he'd been drunk online and 'felt bad for you.'
- **Rock bottom: a declined card at Food Emporium in summer 2008.**
  Avoiding his balance, his card was declined buying chicken, rice and tofu, and he cried on the subway. His parents said come home; a friend said get licensed. He licensed the day Lehman filed, needed only $2,000 a month, made $9,000 in year one, and thrived because competitors fled the crash.
- **2018: outselling the next team by ~$350M in a bad year.**
  In a rough New York market he crossed roughly $800M in sales despite being 'by far the least connected,' beating the next team by about a million dollars a day. He credits treating time as high-value currency.

OTHER RELEVANT

• Build a brand from zero by becoming the ‘mayor’ of a town.

Anonymous in a new city, he’d interview every dry cleaner and café owner on his phone, buy a cheap alliterative site (‘Growing Up Georgetown’), optimise it for search and AI answers on where to eat and who to hire, then convert that trust into real estate. Give, give, give, then ask.

• Move up-market by saying no to the comfortable work.

Burnout is repeating the same thing without results. He dropped rentals—70% of New York’s market—for sales only and endured ‘brutal’ months. Most people never take that bet because their bills depend on the old work.

• Contrarian timing can be an edge, but judge the economics.

He launched his firm in 2020 amid COVID with a 9-month-old and a house under construction, against his parents’ advice, using the frozen spring market to build ‘under the cover of darkness.’ Now he sees struggling brokerages whose ‘underlying economics don’t work’—losing money not to grow but because they lose money—and ego stops them fixing it.

Marketing Expert: The Playbook Behind Every Great Campaign | Rory Sutherland

Guest: Rory Sutherland
Date: 2025-12-09 · Duration: 2:00:07
URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QBznUHAopxU

KEYPOINTS

• People can't choose without comparison, so 'AI picks your perfect holiday' misunderstands decisions.
Rory Sutherland argues that at the very least AI will need to show three to five options, because we only like something by choosing it over something else. Almost nobody clicked Google's 'I'm Feeling Lucky', yet removing it reduced the page's appeal. Estate agents first show a slightly pricier, less suitable house so the target house wins by contrast — a decoy effect.

• We look for efficiency in the wrong place: cost cutting is visible, value creation is tacit.
The 'doorman fallacy': consultants define a five-star hotel's doorman as 'opening the door', replace him with an automatic door, save $30–40K and take credit. Two years later rates collapse, because he also provided security, hailed taxis, handled luggage, recognised regulars and conferred status. As Roger Martin says, any idiot can cut costs; the skill is cutting without destroying value. He calls gain-share consulting deals a scam.

• Human contact does disproportionate heavy lifting in how we judge organisations.
We have hundreds of thousands of years of evolved skill judging whether to trust a person and none judging postal efficiency, so we use people as proxies. Sutherland says that about half the time he'd honestly advise clients to move 10–20% of the marketing budget into the call centre, and that the best agents should earn six figures.

• Trust in the seller substitutes for questions we can't answer.
Buying a used car, a tidy house and a female vicar at the door might raise what you'd pay by about 20%; a man in his underpants knocks off $1,000 or more. Estate agents keep buyers and sellers apart until commitments are made. Sutherland once walked away from a house because the owner was difficult about the fridge — and the garden later turned out to partly belong to Network Rail.

• Transaction utility: how a purchase feels changes what we'll pay.
In Richard Thaler's beach thought experiment, people will pay more for an identical cold beer from a boutique hotel than from a shack, though it's drunk on the beach either way. Sutherland frames many 'irrational' heuristics as reducing downside variance rather than optimising — like his rule that holidays with a rental car are better because they add optionality.

• Private and family-run companies market better because they optimise customer value, not quarterly shareholder value.
Listed companies are 'incentivised to behave like psychopaths' through short-term transactional focus. Four of five gold winners at the UK IPA effectiveness awards were family firms — McCain, Yorkshire Tea, Specsavers and Laithwaites — and the fifth was Guinness. He cites Costco, Enterprise, Aldi, and Buffett's instruction to run a company as if your family's money is in it for 100 years.

• Advertising is a subordinate part of marketing; Dyson wins on customer experience.
Per Drucker, marketing is finding and keeping customers profitably. When staff presented call-centre efficiency stats, James Dyson reportedly stopped them: a customer getting in touch is an honour, not an interruption. Sutherland's frugal half-Scottish father owned three or four Dysons because every rare call got fast, sometimes free, parts.

• Marketing and innovation are fat-tailed, so paying by the hour and judging by the quarter underfunds them.
5–10% of efforts may deliver 110% of value. An Ogilvy Australia idea has made a large FMCG company over $1B in 10 years across about 100 markets; the agency made about A$350,000. 'You don't find entrepreneurs in chess clubs, you find them in casinos.' Once safe, spend about half your effort trying to get lucky.

• Don't benchmark against your most obvious competitor.
Sutherland defends Jaguar's 'Copy Nothing' (founder William Lyons's phrase): it can't out-scale BMW, Mercedes and Audi, so targeting the wealthy younger creative class is a reasonable bet. Undifferentiated markets become red oceans where nobody wins. He separates real self-inflicted damage like Gillette's ad from 'confected outrage' around Bud Light and American Eagle.

• Big new ideas need more marketing, not less.
Human defaults are 'do what I did before' and 'do what everyone else does' — rational because they're rarely catastrophic. Novelty triggers anxiety, often overcome one-to-one: his astrophysicist brother persuaded him to buy the first of his three EVs. Stewart Butterfield's test of innovation is behaviour change; often the winner isn't the best tech but the nicer interface, like Jony Ive's iMac versus beige PCs.

EXAMPLES

• Royal Mail satisfaction tracked the postman, not service levels.
Districts with reliable next-day delivery didn't love Royal Mail; some with patchy service did. Testing showed the main driver was whether you liked your postie — the one who left parcels in the porch and chatted.

• Expensive goods signal to ourselves, too.
'Because I'm worth it.' Paul Dolan defends his Rolex as good cost per hour of pleasure, to be handed to his son. A £100 video game played 100 hours is cheap entertainment, which is why big TVs for poorer households are rational. Hermès Kelly bags resell above store price. British sparkling wine was rescued by raising quality 10–20% and price about 150%.

• Buying a once-in-a-generation asset can justify 'overpaying'.
Shane recounts John Bragg of Oxford, Nova Scotia (pop. ~1,100), who built three multibillion-dollar companies including Eastlink. He levered up only on predictable assets and didn't mind paying the most, since fibre or a lakefront cottage may never come up again.

• Over-legalising judgement.

Citing Philip K. Howard: one family demanding a street's nut trees be cut down for an allergic grandchild sets a precedent for deforestation; a drunk trespasser suing over a shallow pond was rejected because the logic would ban lakes and swings.

• Status games can be positive-sum.

Geoffrey Miller's two tribes: one signals with axe fights, the other by hunting and sharing meat. Jay Leno's garage turns a selfish pleasure into a generous one. Luxuries like his grandparents' 1959–61 dishwasher, one of the first in Wales, later become affordable.

OTHER RELEVANT

• Arbitrage what others dislike but you don't mind.

Someone bought a house on his advice: don't optimise, because everyone wants that house; find a flaw you don't care about, like a happy pub or a railway line next door.

• Write copy conversationally and concretely.

Favour verbs over adjectives and adjectives over adverbs, use Anglo-Saxon words, turn features into benefits, and drop in the odd long word as Ogilvy did. Conan Doyle never makes you flip back a page. Sometimes one fact, like vaccination dating to the 1700s, persuades best.

• Define problems in 'feels like' terms.

Like a feels-like temperature, consider psychology before technology — the fix may be far cheaper. Put the call centre next to the board or development team, as one Microsoft team did. Rational analysis is a springboard, not the gold standard.

How to Build a Powerful Cult

Guest: Lulu Cheng Meservey
Date: 2025-09-16 · Duration: 1:48:04
URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I9Njb8Lw5Xc

KEYPOINTS

- **In an endless flood of content, attention goes to a human with conviction and a story that keeps unfolding.**
  Lulu Cheng Meservey — former communications chief at Activision Blizzard and Substack, now founder of the advisory firm Rostra — says launches used to come every few months; now they come several times a day. Infinite content makes individual humans stand out. Conviction is oddly hard to resist — cult and terrorist recruiters win with awful pitches on sheer certainty. A narrative arc, like Scheherazade's thousand and one nights, gives people a reason to stay tuned.
- **Tell the story in the overlap of what you care about and what your audience already cares about.**
  Picture two circles: what you want to say and what they're thinking about. Your circle alone won't land; theirs alone does nothing for you. Start in the overlap — the 'gateway drug' — and walk them into the rest. A defence-tech startup shouldn't lead with marketing drivel. It should start with how to prepare for a possible invasion of Taiwan, and then show where its software fits.
- **The hook matters most, then the story, then the medium — most people reverse it.**
  People obsess over which podcast to pitch before working out what will make a fish bite. The best distribution is being so interesting that people can't stop retelling you. Online you get under five seconds; on social video, about 99% of viewers are gone by 30 seconds. For email it's the subject line, for a post the first sentence. Reliable hooks: humor, curiosity, strong emotion, or a fresh angle on something people already follow.
- **The number one mistake is misidentifying your audience.**
  Speaking to all 8 billion people dilutes a message into nothing. 'Be interesting' only means something once you know to whom. Know your audience's 'intellectual and cultural erogenous zones' and accept being less interesting to people you don't need.
- **Corporate and government communication is hollow because the metric became the goal.**
  Comms teams are measured on activity — two op-eds, three podcasts, four town halls — rather than on helping people understand something important. Like mice that keep running a trained route long after every original mouse is replaced, everyone copies everyone. She sees government jargon as a tax on citizens' time. Change comes when a leader such as Shopify's Tobi Lütke does something original and others follow.
- **Startups are like cults, and the leader has to do the talking.**
  You'd never build a cult by hiding the quirky leader behind a polished spokesperson. Selling something unproven needs first-person conviction: 'Look me in the eyes. This will be my life's work.' Press releases have no skin in the game — no glory if they land, no humiliation if they don't — and she calls them a decade obsolete.
- **Trust can be engineered: repeated exposure, shared values, and conviction repeated over time.**
  First stop being a stranger; parasocial familiarity counts. Then establish shared values — she wouldn't take a restaurant tip from someone with opposite tastes. Gavin Newsom opens debates by agreeing on something trivial. Repetition from a trusted source moves beliefs: Elon's Mars talk sounded crazy at first, but by the 10,000th time people who trust him believe it.
- **Make yourself a hard target; deterrence is set by how you respond.**
  In The Three-Body Problem, aliens hold off while a 'Wallfacer' with perfect deterrence holds the trigger, then call his weak successor's bluff. Palmer Luckey reliably hits back, so attacks rarely land. Shopify fights every patent troll despite the cost, and now gets none. Robert Axelrod's work suggests 'tit for two tats' in repeated games: forgive the first slight, never the second.
- **Before responding to an attack, ask two questions; if both are yes, respond fast.**
  Is it reaching people who matter? Is the accusation material? An attack from your opponent's camp can be a gift worth turning into an ad. If both answers are yes, act immediately. Like a broken nose, reset it now or re-break it years later.
- **If you're fighting a story with a statistic, you're losing.**
  Pro-NAFTA GDP percentages meant nothing beside 'Shane, father of 12, just lost his job.' Charities show one girl or one named panda. Every great political story follows the Shire-to-Mordor structure. Beneath your statistics lie better stories — the Rippling–Deel spy flushing a phone overpowers every revenue claim.

EXAMPLES

- **Coinbase versus CrowdStrike.**
  Brian Armstrong spoke in his own voice and turned a crisis into a costly proof of values; CrowdStrike's statement read as if written by 'a bar of attorneys.' A CEO's job is to weigh all interests, not defer to lawyers: legal risk might cost $100 million, lost trust billions. In one case she saw, silence on a false accusation cost over 10x the legal exposure.
- **Eminem's final battle in 8 Mile.**
  He goes first and turns every attack on himself, leaving his rival nothing. Her lesson: do the 'pre-buttal.' A lie travels faster than the truth, and rebuttals often get a tenth of the engagement.
- **Boom Supersonic's single foil.**
  Blake Scholl targeted one 50-year-old rule banning fast flight over land, written when the real problem was noise, and helped get it overturned. 'Red tape' would have given people nothing to rally around.
- **P = F/A for reputational pressure.**
  On defense, widen the surface: 'you're not attacking Substack, you're attacking all independent writers.' On offense, narrow it to one reporter with a specific conflict rather than 'the media,' which sounds tinfoil-hat.
- **Recruiting the AI researchers.**
  A founder wanted researchers but kept doing NPR; they read Simon Willison's newsletter and LessWrong. Distribution is a vector — magnitude means nothing without direction.

OTHER RELEVANT

- **Show up in person.**
  When someone being dunked on replies 'thanks for the feedback,' the critic often folds. Sam Altman defends his staff directly.
- **Spar to stay sharp.**
  Leaders who face hostile questions are sharper than coddled 'god-king' CEOs who freeze. Start with a trusted inner circle; she mutes toxic accounts but wants to see disagreement.
- **At work, you're a product for a specific audience.**
  People will remember two things about you; choose them. A VP aiming for CEO identifies who decides, what they must believe, and the message, medium and messenger. For emails: know what you want to say, say it, say why they should care, and use plain words.

The Book Whisperer: How to Write a New York Times Bestseller | Charlie Hoehn

Guest: Charlie Hoehn
Date: 2024-12-10 · Duration: 1:39:17
URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BaZwtB2GI8U

KEYPOINTS

• Write for one or two real people, and the book reaches more.

Hoehn says the fastest way to kill a book is to write for a vague mass audience or your whole fan base, slipping into 'we need to…' preaching. The strongest books are written for one real person, sometimes the author. And you must 'become the book' first, as Naval put it. Think of expertise as a ladder: write for readers a few rungs below you, whom you can pull up, not for peers or those above.

• Test the transformation on real people before you write.

Ideally you've coached or consulted at least three people through the change you're codifying, so you know their questions, emotional hurdles and technical obstacles. Like watching a user try your app, real feedback shows where people get stuck or bored. The alternative is iterating after launch: Hal Elrod sold about 13,000 copies of The Miracle Morning in year one, revised the manuscript after every negative review until they stopped, and passed a million copies around year six.

• Self-publish unless a publisher offers serious skin in the game.

He shares Nat Eliason's rule: take a traditional deal if the advance is $100,000 or more; for 95%+ of authors he talks to, it doesn't make sense. Publishers take most of the royalties—self-publishing Atomic Habits would have paid James Clear roughly 3x per copy—and lock the book in place. Since at least 80% of purchases happen online, mostly on Amazon, retail distribution matters less. But most people botch self-publishing, so the book still has to be first-rate.

• Pay a specialist cover designer, and aim for iconic rather than derivative.

A $500 Upwork or PowerPoint-designer cover is always unremarkable. Use cover specialists such as Pete Garceau, who did covers for Adam Grant and James Clear, or the directory at I Need a Book Cover. Chip Kidd describes a cover as a haiku of the whole book. Like a YouTube thumbnail, it must instantly signal quality and the right feeling to the target reader. Giving designers covers you hate is useful; asking them to copy someone else's makes yours blend into the sea.

• The title is the biggest marketing decision—test it like a comedian tests jokes.

Almost every book that sells over 10,000 copies spreads by word of mouth, so the title must spark curiosity or FOMO, be fun to say, and come up naturally in conversation. Cameron Herold's Meetings Suck surfaced whenever people complained about meetings. 'How I Cured My Anxiety' felt like an accusation to recommend, so it became Play It Away. Hoehn scores titles on about seven criteria in a custom GPT, then polls them on PickFu. 'F*** Work' tested well but set the wrong expectations, which would have meant bad reviews.

• Don't write a word until the table of contents is validated.

Map your target reader from zero to hero in two to four parts (usually three) of milestones, with substeps or reader questions inside each part. Show the table of contents to real readers and sort chapters into 'hell yes,' 'eh' and 'not relevant.' One author Hoehn advised got a publisher template with no structure, like picking light fixtures before designing the house. Brené Brown co-creates by presenting her talking points to friends over a weekend in an Airbnb.

• Use a formulaic chapter when writing; make it sing in editing.

Writing gets the clay on the table; editing shapes the sculpture. Draft every chapter with five beats: hook (a story or bold, even dangerous, claim), thesis, body, key takeaways, and a segue to the next chapter. Then concentrate editing on the front, because readers drop off like a YouTube retention graph—Hoehn cites a figure that the average reader finishes about 15% of a book. The introduction is a sales page for the book. Chapter one's first story should be the most memorable embodiment of the message. Don't bury your best material in the back.

• AI is an excellent assistant but a poor writer over long stretches.

Hoehn calls Claude the strongest editor. He has AI interview him one question at a time and write its own prompts. His process has authors talk, which is about 3x faster than typing and avoids writer's block, then AI turns the structured transcripts into prose in their voice. Shane Parrish hid two fully AI-written paragraphs in Clear Thinking that no one has spotted. Hoehn says that works for a paragraph or three, but over hundreds of pages it stops feeling human, and readers who detect AI tune out.

EXAMPLES

• The real odds of selling books.

Over 500,000 books come out each year and the average sells under 1,000 copies in its lifetime. Hoehn puts 1,000 sales around the 90th percentile and 100,000 at roughly 98–99%. About 20 a year sell a million, mostly fiction. 10,000 copies is a lot of books.

• What it takes to hit the New York Times list.

Typically 10,000–20,000 copies in a week, about $450,000 of books at 15,000 copies, plus geographic distribution, ebook read rates, and media and social signals—on a list that is editorial, not purely sales-based. Dave Ramsey reportedly sold 60,000 copies at launch and missed it; The Psychology of Money never hit it. December is the worst month to launch.

• Shane Parrish's self-published mental models books.

Hardcovers cost about $7–8 to print and sold for $30. After Amazon's cut, distributor fees, shipping and storage, Farnam Street made perhaps 50 cents to $1 a copy. Four books took seven years and a full-time person just to maintain.

• Tim Ferriss tested titles on Google Ads.

He ran 30–50 candidates, including 'Drug Dealing for Fun and Profit.' The 4-Hour Workweek got roughly double the click-through of the runner-up.

• Play It Away's 10-day email course.

Hoehn reordered the book into quick wins—starting with the few supplements that help—added an excerpt credit and a review request every third email, and put it on a popular post. Around 30,000 people went through it, with reviews converting at

3x the typical rate.

OTHER RELEVANT

- **Make readers co-creators before launch.**
  Survey your list for their two biggest questions, let them vote on titles and covers, share setbacks, and use beta-reader tools. A cold ‘my book is out, please buy it’ email gets ignored.
- **Treat launch week as a victory lap.**
  Sales spike at the pre-order announcement and on release day; bundle multiple copies with services people already buy. Aim for reviews equal to about 1% of copies sold.
- **Books that sell a million transform readers visibly.**
  Diets and Can’t Hurt Me spread because others notice the change. The Subtle Art was timely and timeless, applying Buddhism to social media burnout.
- **Create or revive a category.**
  Ryan Holiday’s early marketing books underperformed until he revived stoicism; Ferriss named lifestyle design. Experiment in public, and when you strike oil, keep drilling.

How to Become a Master Storyteller (What Nobody Teaches You!)

Guest: Matthew Dicks
Date: 2024-09-03 · Duration: 1:54:19
URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bZDiwANRS84

KEYPOINTS

• A story is change over time; everything else is just reporting on your life.

Most people think a story is things that happened, told in order. Dicks calls that reporting, which only your mother or spouse is obliged to hear. A real story shows a realization ('I used to think one thing, now I think another') or, more rarely, a transformation. An anecdote is cotton candy: a funny golf or airport moment people enjoy and forget. A story is one of the best meals of your life, remembered for years. The aim isn't 'that happened to me too' but 'I once felt that way.'

• No one wants to hear what you have to say unless you give them a reason to listen.

That belief should be 'in your bone marrow' whether you're telling a story, showing data or giving a keynote. You compete with every piece of information on the internet. Dicks's test: if the power went out now, would anyone care? Once, alone at a blackout screening, he never returned to finish the film. Another time, with his daughter, they wanted to drive to another theater to see the ending.

• Remember stories; never memorize them.

Speaker and audience play a game in which both pretend the story is made up on the spot. Dicks knows the beats and scenes but not the sentences, so he can read the room. Memorizers are 'word callers' who speak at an audience, not to it. He carries five spare anecdotes to win back a drifting crowd. Once he paused mid-speech to tell a phone-checker, 'I really hope your kid is on the way to the hospital.' Former Moth director Catherine Burns told him the imperfection is the beauty: doubling back shows the story is for this room.

• Describe almost nothing; borrow the audience's imagination.

People want what you felt, said and did. 'Classroom' or 'kitchen' calls up a fully furnished image already in the listener's mind, more powerful than any description. Every needless detail, like piercing blue eyes, steals bandwidth the audience must spend tracking it. Dicks cites research finding that readers connect more with simply drawn comic characters than photorealistic ones because they fill in the rest themselves.

• Start at the end, then make the beginning its opposite.

First decide what changed: what is the one thing you're trying to say? A keynote saying three things says nothing. For a marketing deck, he asks for the last three slides first. The opening must be the opposite of the ending: the story that ends with the most powerful teaching tool he owns begins with 'just a spoon.' Films do the same. In When Harry Met Sally, the leads start out hating each other. In Independence Day, every protagonist begins disrespected by those they value most and ends earning their respect.

• Keep attention with stakes, suspense, surprise and humor.

An 'elephant' is the big, obvious question (will Matt get the spoon?), as when Steve Jobs opened in 2007 with 'I've been waiting two and a half years to share this with you.' A 'backpack' loads the audience with your plan before it fails, as in Ocean's 11. 'Breadcrumbs' hint at what's coming. 'Hourglasses' slow down at the peak, like bullet time in The Matrix or an orange chair mentioned purely for delay. 'Crystal balls' are spoken predictions, like earnings guidance. Suspense is strategic exclusion plus inclusion: say 'a metal object,' not 'spoon.'

• Use humor early, and right before the knife.

A laugh in the first 30–60 seconds tells an anxious audience you know what you're doing. Humor makes you seem closer and smarter and rescues dull data or demos; he has tech teams invent amusing fake companies. A laugh just before something painful sharpens the contrast, like dumping someone at the end of the best date of their life. His wife's favorites are his 'laugh, laugh, cry' stories.

• Connect scenes with 'but' and 'therefore,' never 'and then.'

'And' stories, including most sales decks, are scenes you could shuffle or remove without loss. 'But/therefore' links make every scene load-bearing: it's the spoon of power, therefore I must have it; I chase him, but he escapes. 'But' is the most powerful word in storytelling. Saying what something is not ('Shane is not stupid') adds energy, so clients spend a week describing things only by what they aren't.

• Don't lie—but cut, condense and enlarge your own stupidity.

Dicks hates 'never let the facts get in the way of a good story': once you lie, you can't be trusted. He removes a friend who did nothing in the car, compresses two days into one and moves locations closer together—only to serve the story, never to flatter himself. He will exaggerate his own foolishness, because vulnerability is what audiences crave.

EXAMPLES

• The Spoon of Power.

Dicks declared a student's found kitchen spoon the 'spoon of power,' chased him for 18 minutes and lost; Jamie had filed it in the library 'under S for spoon.' Jamie then hung it on classmates having bad days, and on the last day gave it to Dicks. Sixteen years later, during the hardest pandemic school year, colleagues wore it too. At a masked event, people queued to touch it.

• The scout swim test, told in BABC order.

Instead of opening in 1983—he quit a swim test with nine pancakes in his belly and spent two days a rowboat-bound 'beginner'—he starts with his son packing for camp, flashes back, then returns. His son passed: 'I heard you in my head, Dad.' A 40-year story becomes a week-long one.

• Kiss your wife every morning.

A speaker had Facebook's 'seven friends in 10 days' example for singular solutions to bottlenecks. Dicks urged him to use his personal story instead: a friend's advice to kiss his wife each morning saved his struggling marriage. That's the version audiences remember and repeat.

- **The McDonald's robbery.**
  At about 20, robbers who had already killed two people put a gun to his head and twice pulled the trigger on an empty chamber. What he felt was regret at having done nothing yet—the root of his not caring what people think.
- **What's wrong with Wonder Woman.**
  As a strategic listener, he noticed the heroine only rallies after a man sacrifices himself—unlike Luke Skywalker or Iron Man, who win without that.

OTHER RELEVANT

- **Leave a frayed end.**
  Thelma and Louise ends with the car mid-air; unresolved stories linger.
- **Vulnerability is like a high dive.**
  It stays terrifying for several jumps, but audiences reward it. No one has ever thought less of him for his worst-behavior stories.
- **On the page, layout replaces voice.**
  Give the punchline its own paragraph, drop subjects for speed, and avoid topic sentences: show the grandmother's cruelty, then let readers conclude it.
- **Make kids love writing.**
  Have them read work aloud, ignore spelling at first, aim for six praises per correction, and let them abandon bad drafts.

Seth Godin: "Failure is Learning on Your Way to Mastery" and Other Advice for Creativity

Guest: Seth Godin
Date: 2024-03-26 · Duration: 1:21:35
URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gX-n8I2PAdY

KEYPOINTS

• 'Process saves us from the poverty of our intentions.'
Quoting the sculptor Elizabeth King, Godin says bad moods, speed bumps and a stranger's negative feedback can easily spiral into deciding the work doesn't matter. A practice carries you through, because you already decided there would be a blog post tomorrow. 'Make the decision once, then you have a practice forever.' He has written more than 7,500 daily blog posts without missing one.

• Be for the smallest viable audience, not everyone, because the internet is a micro medium.
Nothing has become a mass medium since television. The internet is the best tool ever for reaching specific people and terrible at reaching everyone: 'there is no homepage'. Harry Potter, which made its author over a billion dollars, is for precocious 12-year-olds and people who remember being one. When a friend said his book was 'for everybody', Godin predicted in writing that it would fail. Saying 'everyone' lets you hide, while naming who it's for puts you on the hook.

• His three pillars: the change you seek to make, the possibility you see, and the emotional labor you'll spend.
Are you here to contribute or to take, to comply or to question? Then, do you see the world as it really is? Millions read Ben Graham and almost none became Warren Buffett. Finally, do you care enough to do the hard work of learning? He flips Dolly Parton's line: 'Do it on purpose and you'll find out who you are.'

• Learning is failing on the way to mastery; education is mostly compliance.
You can read about swimming, but you learn by doing it. The only college and business school courses where he learned anything were essentially open-book, because you had to actually do the work. At Acton Academy schools, about 50 kids aged 5 to 17 teach each other, can't ask adults questions, and get weekly reports on what they built and whom they helped.

• A sunk cost is a gift from your former self, and you don't have to accept it.
A mason across the street had signs advertising 'quality masonry' with masonry misspelled. He knew it cost him business, but he'd paid for 50 signs. If he'd found them by the roadside, he'd never have picked them up. People stay unhappy as lawyers for ten more years to spare their parents an hour of disappointment. In relationships, ask whether the new relationship will be better a year from now, or whether you're just shopping for novelty. Used deliberately, a sunk cost can help: his blog streak gets him over the hump on a blank Thursday.

• Narrow your decisions by walling off whole categories, and design the container before the content.
Godin calls his mild ADD both a curse and an asset. He walls off areas: no meat since around 1980, no television. Limiting inputs means a day without his real work would be a day of nothing. As a former book packager (120 books), he defines a medium's constraints first, then finds an idea that fits. He solved a podcast format in his head, lost interest, and said yes only when someone offered to fund it as a lab. It's now in its eighth season.

• Doing what you love is for amateurs; loving what you do is for professionals.
A professional makes a promise and keeps it whether or not they feel like it: they don't miss deadlines, throw tantrums or go over budget. Godin wears a work uniform (once a lab coat, lately a Japanese firefighter's happi coat) to signal 'do your work'. The phrase 'permission marketing' came to him in the shower because he vowed to stay until he had a name, with only a 40-gallon hot water tank.

• Quality means meeting spec, so define the spec and ship.
Following Deming, quality isn't luxury. Under an electron microscope a Lexus is full of defects, all within spec, and the original target was a standard deviation better than Mercedes. Good enough is a definition, not a slur. He left a symbolic logic exam with unlimited time after three and a half hours because he'd met his spec, while one student stayed 18 hours. Miles Davis made Kind of Blue in four days. Would four more have helped?

• Useful criticism comes from someone with domain knowledge who isn't seeking status by hurting you.
Most criticism comes from people who'd feel better if you felt worse. Diane von Furstenberg had great taste but couldn't explain why things worked, so Godin says you should hire people like that, not work for them. Two book-industry veterans were the first to explain to him in words why books succeeded, and that taxonomy shaped his career. Coaching is different from criticism: it helps people see what they're capable of, given what they say matters to them.

EXAMPLES

• David Chang turns away a regular
For five or six weeks, Momofuku made Godin Brussels sprouts without bacon. Then David Chang suggested a vegetarian-friendly restaurant a block away. Godin says that was the day Momofuku became Momofuku: it chose whom it was for.

• Where 'hack' comes from
Hackney, once on London's outskirts, raised ordinary cheap horses, which suited cab drivers. A hack gives the audience exactly what it expects, like a 50th-anniversary tour where the band covers itself. Godin wants work where people can tell the difference.

• The speaking request with no budget
When a group asks for a free 20-minute talk, he sends four YouTube videos and suggests they watch and discuss them. That almost never happens, because the real request was status, not learning. He believes a quick, generous no beats silence or a yes you don't follow through on.

• 800 rejections
He sold his first book on his first day in publishing, then received 800 rejection letters in a row. Learning to separate 'this idea doesn't work for us' from 'you're a bad person' was central to his development.

- **Double-crossing the boss at Diplomacy**
  At 23, at Spinnaker, he betrayed the company president in a board game alliance. It took a year to repair the relationship. Godin's lesson was that people have different stories about money and 'just business'.

OTHER RELEVANT

- **Live talks deliver emotion, not information**
  To share information, write a memo. A live talk is a performance meant to change how the room feels: he uses 150–190 slides in 45–50 minutes. Online, the aim should be energy, not the status of 'getting the speaker live'.
- **Fire the world's worst boss**
  No one would tolerate a boss who woke them at night to say they'd never amount to anything, yet our inner voice often does exactly that. Godin favors catching the shame cascade early, CBT-style, and treating the work as the work, not as a verdict on you.
- **People don't want what you want**
  His hardest business lesson: founders assume employees will be as motivated by equity as they are, so stock options can become a demotivator. A thousand true fans is enough. Leaving the status games behind, like skipping TED, was freeing.

The Marketing Expert: Sell Anything with this Trick | April Dunford

Guest: April Dunford
Date: 2024-02-27 · Duration: 1:12:27
URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vM_1G1LCotU

KEYPOINTS

• Positioning is the foundation, not the tagline.
April Dunford defines positioning as how your product is the best in the world at delivering some value that a well-defined set of customers cares a lot about. People confuse it with messaging, taglines or 'brand positioning,' but those are things you do with positioning once it exists. If marketing and sales are the house, positioning is the foundation. In practice, it's context-setting: what is this, what's it about, and why should I care?

• The category you choose triggers a whole set of assumptions.
Positioning works like the opening scene of Apocalypse Now. Within three minutes you know it's Vietnam, Saigon, a traumatised lead and not a comedy, so you can settle into the story. Say 'CRM' and a tech buyer instantly assumes you compete with Salesforce, track a sales pipeline, sell to the VP of sales and charge less than Salesforce. When those assumptions are true, marketing and sales save huge effort. When they're false, sales spends every call undoing the damage.

• Most companies never position deliberately, because it feels obvious.
A founder decides 'email sucks, we'll build better email.' Two years of customer feedback later, the product looks more like chat, but everyone inside still calls it email and customers are confused. Because nobody chose 'email' on purpose, nobody knows how to reposition. Most products could be positioned in a dozen markets if you looked with fresh eyes.

• Win an underserved slice, then push outward.
Most successful tech companies dominate a subsegment too small for the leader to care about, then creep toward the leader. Salesforce started with small businesses that had no IT department, selling 'no software' cloud CRM. Dunford was at Siebel then, and Siebel shrugged: 'We sell great big million-dollar enterprise deals.' Investors want a billion-dollar addressable market. But to close your first five or ten deals you must be the best at something, so tell investors the long-term story and win the niche first.

• In B2B, the granddaddy of emotions is fear.
The average B2B deal has five to 11 stakeholders. The buyer can't tell the boss 'I liked the vibe.' The case has to be made on making money or saving money. Fear of looking bad or being fired is why incumbents win: nobody gets fired for picking Salesforce, which has double the market share of its nearest rival. Advocating for something new has a huge downside and little upside — unless your job is transformation, as with today's 'figure out AI' mandates.

• The scariest competitor is 'no decision.'
Matt Dixon's The JOLT Effect analysed 2.5 million recorded sales calls during COVID lockdowns. It found that 40–60% of B2B purchase processes end in no decision. These buyers didn't choose to stay with what they have. Everything looked the same and they couldn't decide confidently, so they told the boss 'let's look next year.' Vendors pitch 'why pick us' when the real question is 'why pick us over the other guys?'

• Talk about why the features matter.
Dunford breaks positioning into components: competitive alternatives (what customers would do if you didn't exist), differentiated capabilities, the value those capabilities deliver, and who cares a lot about that value. Messaging comes last. Technical teams assume buyers can translate a feature into value, but they often can't. Even megapixels had to be taught once.

• Sales stories should map the whole market.
The hero's-journey arc leaves out competitors. Dunford's pitches open with how the company sees the market differently. Then they lay out the alternative approaches with their pluses and minuses, and ask whether the product fits. Half of B2B buyers have never bought a product like yours before, and that's what helps them decide confidently. Postman did this with its 'API-first world' point of view and even a graphic novel on its homepage.

EXAMPLES

• The double chocolate salted caramel muffin.
In line at Tim Hortons at 8 a.m., Dunford watched a man order what is really cake. Called a muffin, it competes with bagels and doughnuts at $1–2 instead of tiramisu at $10–15, and it's socially acceptable for breakfast. Same product, different context.

• Jana Systems: 'CRM for investment banks.'
Jana had $2 million in revenue and six customers against Siebel's $2 billion and 400. Customers asked how Jana was better, and the honest answer was that it wasn't. Its one uncopyable feature drew 'what do we do with that?' Then an accidental investment-bank deal revealed the feature's value there. Jana repositioned, and with two banks it was 'king' of the niche. The plan ran from retail banking to insurance to financial services, then all of enterprise CRM.

• The database nobody needed fast.
A bank query that ran all weekend took seconds on a patented database. Repositioning from 'database' (against Oracle) to 'data warehouse' improved first calls. But most banks didn't need weekend answers sooner. Only customer-service use cases did, at about 10 companies worldwide.

• Listening in on first sales calls.
As VP of marketing, she judged positioning by prospects' confused faces and 'back it up'. Other warning signs were 'so you're just like Salesforce' or 'couldn't I do that with a spreadsheet?'

OTHER RELEVANT

• Skip the grandmother test.
A product for airplane mechanics only needs to click with airplane mechanics; measure how quickly new prospects 'get it.'

• Positioning is cross-functional.

Product, sales, marketing, customer success and support set it together; marketing stewards it. Fake category creation usually backfires.

- **B2B isn't Liquid Death.**
  Consumer-goods marketing theory breaks down when selling a million dollars of middleware to a committee afraid of being fired.