

# Is This Your *Last Issue?*

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Since launching free-range thinking™ in August 1999, I have intended for this publication to stimulate a conversation about the way our sector communicates. Each month, I profile best practices and resources that can help you reach more people more effectively, and I welcome your feedback, story ideas, and even the occasional flame. At barest minimum, though, I ask readers to check in once each year to let me know they're alive, well, and still interested in receiving regular visits from the grazing cows.

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## EXPERIENCE *Required*

When you buy a pound of coffee beans at the supermarket, you are purchasing a *product* in its most basic form. The cost of the cup you brew at home, consequently, is relatively low—somewhere between 5 to 25 cents. When you buy a cup of Joe at the average diner, the product combines with a *service* for which you pay a little more—typically 50 to 99 cents per cup.

Walk into Starbucks, on the other hand, and something entirely new is happening. The lighting, furniture, and piped in music combine to create the atmosphere of a comfortable neighborhood hangout. If you're

a regular, the barista who custom brews your drink addresses you by name. By the time you leave, you've probably forked over \$2.80 to \$3.50 for your cup of java because you got more than a product or a service—you had an *experience*.

**If you want people to pay more attention to your cause, just watch how Starbucks convinces customers to pay more for coffee.**

That consumers will gladly pay a premium for an experience is the essential insight of *The Experience Economy*, a business book, you may recall, that made my list of must-*not* reads in July. The bad review still stands, but this insight is worth another look, especially if you want your audience to start paying more attention to your cause. ▶

► The product-service-experience hierarchy in the coffee example has a thought-provoking analogue in public interest communications. To illustrate, let's set aside our tall soy lattes with extra foam for a moment and focus on a serious issue: gun control. According to the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, there were 81,325 federally licensed firearms dealers and pawnbrokers operating in the United States in 2000. That's a *fact*, certified by the U.S. Department of the Treasury. Since 81,325 is an impressively large number, and with a familiar federal agency standing behind it, this fact commands a certain amount of your attention.

Then again, you may forget it ten minutes from now, which is one problem with facts: they aren't very memorable on their own. But what if we put this fact in *context*? When you compare the number of gun dealers and pawnbrokers with the number of McDonald's franchises operating that same year, you discover that *there were 3 times as many gun dealers as McDonald's*. Given that driving past a McDonald's is practically guaranteed in most parts of America, it's a safe bet you will be reminded of this startling comparison sometime in the near future. So just as a service commands a higher price than a product, context can bring more attention and mind-share to the easily forgotten fact.

Now move one step higher on the ladder and listen to Marlys Nunneri tell her *story*, one that begins in 1954 when she married at the tender age of fifteen. Despite steady verbal and physical abuse from her husband, Marlys faithfully stayed by his side through four decades. The couple finally divorced in 1995, but Marlys kept visiting her ex-husband at his house in Sylmar, California, "thinking he was going to change," she ruefully recalls. During one visit, her ex-husband took out a .38 caliber handgun, yelling,

"You're making me mad! I'm going to kill you!" as Marlys sat on a couch trying to calm him down.

"He had pulled the gun on me before," Marlys recalls, "but this time I knew he was going to do something." Standing at point blank range, Marlys's ex-husband fired a single shot into her chest. Marlys didn't black out immediately, but her memory of the next several minutes is understandably blurry. She recalls hearing police sirens. She remembers mumbling something to paramedics and being lifted into an ambulance. And she will never forget hearing her ex-husband say, "God forgive me."

By sheer coincidence, a heart surgeon was leaving the hospital as an emergency room team worked frantically to save Marlys's life. She was rushed into surgery where doctors discovered that the bullet had penetrated her heart, collapsed a lung, and lodged in her diaphragm, paralyzing it. Despite such severe internal damage and a tremendous loss of blood, her condition was stabilized. Much later, Marlys's children would tell her that the surgeon who operated on her told them, "Everything's working. We don't know how. It must be God."

Marlys spent eighteen days in critical care, remained in the hospital for five weeks after that, and was confined to bed in her home for two months. Five years later, she still suffers from physical disabilities due to that single gunshot and its aftermath, but she is courageously sharing her story with audiences large and small—a soft but compelling voice against gun violence in America.



Photo by Rick Nahmias • 2004

By telling her story, Marlys Nunneri moves the case for gun control well beyond the numbers.

The handgun that nearly killed Marlys Nunneri was purchased legally at San Fernando Sporting Goods, one of over 81,325 places you can buy guns in America. And while you still may forget that number, it's unlikely you'll forget what happened to Marlys, or, more importantly, how her story makes you feel right now.

And therein lies the distinguishing power of storytelling. Not only does it make facts more memorable, it arouses the emotions and engages the audience in ways numbers do not. A particularly dramatic story such as Marlys's may even increase your heart rate, quicken your breathing, and cause your body temper-

ature to rise. In other words, for the audience, a good story *is* an experience, and your ability to remember is heightened because both your mind *and* body have been affected.

"Experience is the best teacher," they say. Used well, storytelling can give your audience experiences they will never forget and earn your cause the attention it deserves. If you still have doubts, just visit a nearby Starbucks. It should remind you that it's time to wake up and tell the story. ■

*(Special thanks to Marlys Nunneri and to Women Against Gun Violence for their help with this story.)*

