

Revisiting the New Dream

Last month's article, "Revisiting the B-Word," told the story of The Center for a New American Dream to share what I believed was a useful lesson about rebranding. One colleague and longtime reader checked in, however, to say that while there is, indeed, a lesson here, my article did not have it exactly right. Since that colleague, Eric Brown, served as Communications Director for The Center for a New American Dream from 1998-2003, I thought his perspective was well worth sharing.

The rebranding of New American Dream has produced better, cleaner messages. However, I think the real story is about how a startup nonprofit establishes itself and grows, and uses rebranding to build on its success.

Back in 1997, at the height of a boom economy – before the MasterCard "Priceless" ads, before the Prius, before *Real Simple* magazine – the Center for a New American Dream began addressing the frustration many Americans were feeling about commercialism, materialism, and frankly, too much stuff. New Dream's motto (complete with bumper sticker) was "more fun, less stuff."

Yes, it had "less" in it, but it was an inviting, quirky message that was really popular with the public and with reporters. We built an energetic membership that told positive stories

(before telling stories was cool, mind you) about how they consumed differently to improve their quality of life and protect the environment. And we got really great press.

Then the dot-com boom busted, 9/11 and the Iraq war happened, and Americans started taking stock of what really matters. New Dream's message began to actually become mainstream. Then they did what all smart organizations do – they adapted.



The logo for New American Dream features the words "new american dream" in a sans-serif font. "new" is in blue, "american" is in blue, and "dream" is in green. A stylized sunburst icon is positioned above the letter "i" in "american".

New Dream built upon its base and responded to a changing consumer culture that now practically takes for granted what this little group with the unusual name had been helping to create. That's where re-branding (and BBMG's excellent work) becomes useful, and that's the story that good, strong organizations ready to make a move can really learn from. ■

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Newsletter edited by Carolyn Ramsay.



Good stories are like diamonds: incredibly valuable but extremely difficult to find. The search goes faster, though, when you heed the advice of an experienced story miner.

Tim Keelan knows how to find a good story. For the last three years, Fortune 500 companies have been hiring Keelan to "mine" their stories so the best practices they contain

can be shared and used widely. Keelan's firm, StoryQuest, which he started in 2003 with one employee (himself) and a steadfast belief in the power of storytelling, now boasts clients such as Lucent Technologies and projects revenue for 2006 of \$1-million.

Keelan learned how to recognize the value of a good story, oddly enough, working as director of sales at Cap Gemini Ernst & Young. While sitting through boring PowerPoint presentations and off-site trainings that

were supposed to help him do his job better, Keelan had a hunch there was a better way to learn. And he found it, he says, "walking down the hall and talking to the guy who just got the McDonald's

account." In short: listening to a good story.

Now Keelan spends his days interviewing business people, carefully editing their stories, and producing CDs or downloadable audio files that clients circulate internally (for training) and externally (for marketing and promotion).

Along the way, he has developed several reliable techniques for digging out and polishing good stories – techniques you can employ to produce some gems of your own.



The graphic "How to Find Good Stories" is overlaid on a close-up photograph of a person's face, focusing on their eyes and ear. The text is in a large, bold, green sans-serif font.



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▶ When Keelan begins work with a new client, he will often hear the familiar refrain, “But I don’t know any good stories!” (a reaction I have encountered in similar efforts with nonprofits.) He just nods and presses forward. “People don’t know their own stories,” he says with a hint of exasperation. To help clients dig deeper inside their own heads, Keelan employs several techniques that will jog their memory and shift them into storytelling mode:

Don’t Accept “We”

Before conducting one-on-one interviews, Keelan lays down one law: “I insist that they tell their story using the first person.” Too often, he explains, storytellers hide behind the word “we,” which makes it difficult to discern exactly who did what in the course of a narrative. By forcing storytellers to say “I,” Keelan makes them carefully consider when *they* are driving the action as opposed to someone else. Invariably, this leads storytellers to identify other players in their tales, and those names go on a list for follow-up interviews. In most cases, by the time he has talked to the follow-ups (as well as *their* follow-ups), Keelan has heard all sides of the story.

Look for Moments of Vulnerability

Typically, a StoryQuest client will ask Keelan to interview its sales people to capture stories that illustrate effective ways to bring in new customers. After hearing dozens of such stories, Keelan has discovered that the most engaging ones have a common element: they do *not* chronicle a straight line to success.

Instead, the salesperson admits to some kind of misstep or outright mistake while pitching to a prospect. And it is precisely this moment of vulnerability, Keelan asserts, that creates empathy for the storyteller and lends authenticity to the story. “When people are willing to share something vulnerable,” he says, “the audience will be more likely to trust them.”

Push for Quotes and Details

Just as he won’t accept “we,” Keelan does not allow clients to give him only the gist of conversations that occur within their stories. If an interviewee tells him, “And then the boss asked why I was late for the meeting,” Keelan will gently press for the exact words until the storyteller adds, “Well, what he actually said was, ‘Where the hell have you been?’” Even without an expletive, direct quotes usually enliven a story, so they are worth pursuing. Similarly, Keelan will ask about small details that may seem insignificant to the storyteller – the weather that morning, the name of the restaurant where the meeting was held, what the prospect was wearing – because these can fix a story in time and place, paint a more vivid picture, and give it a more authentic feel.

Do Some Time Traveling

Keelan will also begin interviews by drawing a line on an easel pad, placing a mark in the center, and drawing arrows on either end. The mark, he tells the clients, is today. To the left is the past. To the right, the future. He then hands over the marker and asks the clients to make additional

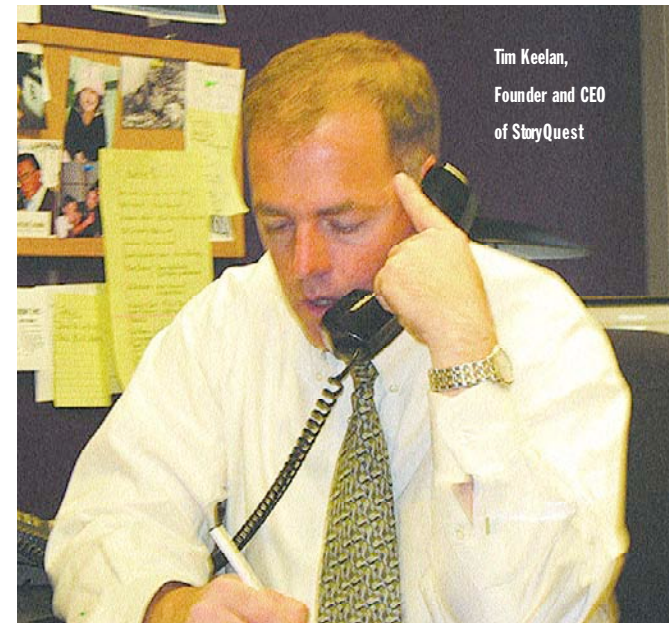
notations on the timeline to indicate significant events in the organization’s history as well as achievements that still lay ahead. Noting historic events, Keelan says, will often prompt stories that had not surfaced in previous interviews. And when clients start thinking about the future, this can tease out additional stories from the past where the moral is, “If we can do more of *that*, we can reach this goal.”

The typical CD that StoryQuest produces for its clients contains five to seven stories. Each piece will run approximately ten to fifteen minutes, featuring several different voices and even some music for background and bridges between segments. (Clients also have access to a web site where the audio can be downloaded for use on MP3 players.) And why is Keelan so committed to audio delivery of the stories he captures?

First, he dismisses print as an undesirable medium from both the storytellers’ and audience’s perspective. “If you ask people to write down their stories—forget it!” he says emphatically. “They don’t have the time. And nobody needs another document to read.” Shooting video (or film) can quickly run up costs, and if you are dealing

with storytellers all over the world—as StoryQuest does with some of its global clients—simply getting them on camera can be prohibitively expensive.

Audio, on the other hand, is more intimate than print and less costly than video. By producing stories that people can listen to in their car or creating podcasts that



Tim Keelan,
Founder and CEO
of StoryQuest

can be downloaded and heard just about anywhere, Keelan makes it easy for anyone to listen. “And there is nothing more powerful,” he says, “than the sound of an honest voice.” ■

(To learn more, visit www.storyquest.us or contact Tim Keelan directly at tkeelan@storyquest.us.)