The universe is made of stories, not of atoms.

—MURIEL RUKEYSER

The power of a good story has a few thousand years of history behind it. Storytellers have captured the rapt attention of their fellow humans for as long as there have been evening fires to tell tales around. Countless poets and bards sang the epic stories of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* long before Homer put them down in print 2,800 years ago. Shakespeare used his storytelling craft in the sixteenth century to spin history into literature, and he remains a global bestseller today (though he never got a piece of the movie rights). Even in the twenty-first century, popular filmmakers like George Lucas are wise enough to realize that a good myth is timeless, and his epic films, rooted in mythology, have grossed something approaching $10 billion, providing powerful evidence of the Storyteller's enduring value.

Brand-savvy modern business organizations also know how to tell a good story. They capture our imagination with compelling narratives of initiative, hard work, and, yes, innovation. They celebrate success and honor stirring recoveries. Whether we consciously realize it or not, businesses are constantly telling stories to their customers, their partners, and themselves. There's the story of a great collaboration, the story of a novel product or a full-bodied service—even the classic tale of a great venture launched in a garage.

Stories persuade in a way that facts, reports, and market trends seldom do, because stories make an emotional connection. The Storyteller brings a team together. Their work becomes part of the lore of the organization over many years. Storytellers weave myths, distilling

events to heighten reality and draw out lessons. Going beyond their oral tradition, modern Storytellers now work in whatever medium best fits their skills and their message: video, narrative, animation, even comic strips. They help inspire other Storytellers to spread the word. Most important, Storytellers make heroes out of real people.

David Haygood, our head of business development, is a natural Storyteller. At first, I thought it was just that Haygood had a more exciting life than the rest of us. It's true that he does volunteer work inside prisons with convicted felons and goes wilderness camping with Navy SEALs. I've heard him recount his swords-to-plowshares story of how, as a draftee in Vietnam, he and his buddies would turn a cold C-ration into a warm pizza by mixing in some extra ingredients and heating it with a tiny pancake of C4 explosives. And he's shared lots of stories about dramatic successes—as well as failures—in a business context. But then one day, while he was telling a really entertaining story about a Monday-morning status meeting at Specialized Bicycles, it dawned on me that it wasn't just his material. Anyone who can turn a status meeting into a riveting tale is a master at the art of storytelling. And it's a very endearing trait.

Timeless Stories with a Purpose

What's another essential truth of storytelling? The creating and telling of myths is part of human nature. It is bigger than any individual organization. Even nations have their time-honored myths—stories strongly associated with a person or an institution that reinforce a cultural value. On a family trip to Boston last year, I was reminded of the story of Paul Revere's midnight ride, triggered by a signal etched into our collective memories: "One if by land, two if by sea." The tale is not only a history lesson studied by most American schoolchildren, but also a story that reminds the listener that one person can make a difference.

There are similar examples in every country and culture in the world, and they are not all about heroes in the traditional sense. Japan has the story of a faithful dog named Hachiko, who dutifully walked

with his owner to Tokyo's Shibuya train station every day, waiting patiently there for the master to return from work. When his owner died suddenly one day without returning home, Hachiko continued to wait for him, returning every day for ten years before passing away in the same spot where he had last seen his master. I've traveled to Tokyo dozens of times and frequently stay at a hotel across from what is now universally known as the "Hachiko entrance" of Shibuya station. Even from twenty-five stories up, I can look down and see the bronze life-size statue built on that spot in memory of the remarkable canine. Hachiko's story has achieved such mythic status that I'd wager nearly every adult in Japan—and most Japanese schoolkids—knows at least the basic outline of the story and its message of honor, duty, and faithfulness. And if you say to literally any native Tokyoite, "I'll meet you

The story of Tokyo's faithful dog Hachiko reinforces the Japanese virtue of steadfast loyalty.

in front of Hachiko," they'll know exactly what you mean. Hachiko died seventy years ago, but his story still has a long time to run.

The lore of a company is a potent way to communicate values and objectives across a widely dispersed and multicultural organization. Hewlett-Packard's tale of starting in the garage is not only cherished by HP's hundred thousand staff members around the world, but is also inspiration for entrepreneurs everywhere who are starting on a shoestring but aspire to future greatness. And Michael Dell's variation of launching toward multibillionaire status from his college dormitory provides extra reassurance for entrepreneurial dreamers who don't have ready access to the requisite garage. Southwest Airlines people love to tell you how the idea for the company was scribbled out on a cocktail napkin, and thousands of other budding business plans have been started the same way since.

The Right Story at the Right Time

Storytelling expert Stephen Denning reminds us that not just any story will do. In books like *The Leader's Guide to Storytelling*, he helps us match up the right kind of narrative with the right situation. Denning says that business stories have focused purposes like sparking action, transmitting values, fostering collaboration, or leading people into the future. Before you begin a story, it's important to know what specific outcome you are hoping to attain. For example, when my kids were toddlers, I used to read them a bedtime story most nights with the intent of calming them down and helping them go to sleep, but if you get that outcome in a business setting very often, it's time to work on your Storyteller role.

Regardless of which type of story you're telling, Denning urges business leaders to be conscious of the distinction between "true" and "authentic." He says corporations spend too much time speaking at the boundaries of truth, when they should aspire to stay at the heart of authenticity. Truth-in-advertising laws insist that the majority of messages you hear from companies are true—at least in the narrow sense of the word—but authentic is more like "the whole truth and nothing but the truth." He distinguishes between the two with a quick historical

illustration: A true story would be "*Titanic* sails on maiden voyage. Seven hundred 'happy' passengers arrive in New York." Technically true, yes, but it fails to hold up to any further scrutiny. True stories can have a lot of spin to them. Authentic stories have deep integrity. Customers, employees, and members of the world community can tell the difference.

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Recently, I've noticed a new trend in company mythology. Whereas most older company lore focused on the visionary founder or president, increasingly stories are being told about the little heroes that make up a company's day-to-day operations. One afternoon at the Starbucks across from our San Francisco office, I was intrigued to find a compelling page-long story neatly laminated and prominently displayed at the front counter. There was a photo of a San Francisco Starbucks barista who had become a manager, and a story in her own words. It told of hard work, joy at supporting good causes like the fight against breast cancer, and her ability to find rewarding challenges in her job. The woman noted with pride that her Starbucks salary and stock had enabled her to buy a home in the San Francisco Bay Area, no small feat. I don't know if you're a Starbucks fan or not, but this small story struck me as authentic and compelling. Of course, it was a wonderful recruiting tool, but it also implicitly says to coffee drinkers everywhere, "We're good people—the kind of people you would be if you were running the world's biggest collection of coffee stores."

No matter how small or large your company, the organization is constantly collecting and spreading stories about your business, your values, and your achievements. Mythic stories endure because they become shared symbols. Passed along from person to person and generation to generation, myths do not always preserve all their factual detail, but the best myths have a ring of authenticity and tell an underlying truth.

Think about the myths you tell, and always strive for authenticity.

Tell Me a Story

So where does storytelling begin? One answer to that question is to ask where Storytellers find their inspiration. And why they believe storytelling is critical to innovation.

As readers of *The Art of Innovation* may remember, Jane Fulton Suri is IDEO's thought leader in the human factors discipline that inspires the Anthropologist. So what can an Anthropologist teach us about the role of Storyteller? Plenty. Jane fervently believes that her work is largely based on listening to and interpreting human stories. On writing them down. On seeking the underlying meaning and implications. On hearing both text and subtexts. On being a Storyteller.

Many of us make the mistake of trying to take shortcuts on the way to capturing other people's stories. With a "bottom line" mind-set, we say, just give me your insights. Tell me the highlights. We're looking for bullet points in a winning presentation. We're looking to cut to the chase.

Jane doesn't ask for instant insights and she doesn't jump to conclusions. She doesn't ask yes-or-no questions, either. She goes into the field and finds interesting people (and almost everyone seems interesting to Jane). Instead of asking questions like "What do you like or dislike about your mobile service?" Jane will start with "Tell me a story about a time your mobile let you down." In the ensuing conversation, she'll uncover plenty of likes and dislikes, but she builds a better personal connection and gains deeper insights by basing the discussion around stories. To her mind, it's about respect and humanity. Asking for a story celebrates and authenticates the experience. She knows from years of fieldwork that when she does this right, without pretense, her subject is thinking, "Oh, they want to listen to me!" Everyone wants to be listened to, and if you can tap into a reservoir of personal stories, the insights you're seeking will start to emerge.

Why is having this patience and laying this groundwork of trust so pivotal? Because, as Jane puts it, storytelling just happens to be a fundamentally human way of conveying information. There's a reason why folklore and religious stories endure. Storytelling is part of the fabric of humanity. And when you respect storytelling, you acknowl-

edge that you're engaged in a human enterprise. You elevate your work. You create a common language. You begin to build a larger community.

Ask Jane about the importance of storytelling and, not surprisingly, she'll tell you a story. A few years ago, as Jane recounts, we worked on a project for a hospital. We kicked things off with a meeting of about twenty nurses, administrators, and doctors. That first session of a Transformation program is typically filled with a healthy mix of skepticism and anticipation among the assembled participants. Start out on the wrong foot and the whole project can suffer. But this particular day, the power of storytelling helped the team bond and reinforced the significance of our goal. In preparation for that kickoff meeting, Jane had asked each member of the group to do a little personal homework: recalling a really bad or good health care experience they had witnessed firsthand. Something *personal.*

Within minutes of going around the room, people were laughing. And crying. One nurse recounted an intense day when a dying man asked her to call his wife, but in spite of all her efforts, the nurse couldn't locate her. She was frantic. The patient was slipping away. She had to find his wife. The man grabbed her arm. "It's OK," he told her. "Now we've got something to do together. You're going to teach me about dying," he said, "and I'm going to teach you about living." The wife never arrived, and the nurse realized that some part of her role that day wasn't just about trying to save this man. Instead, she could offer a priceless gift, letting him share his last moments on earth with another human being.

"It's OK," he told her. "Now we've got something to do together. You're going to teach me about dying," he said, "and I'm going to teach you about living."

As the nurse finished her story, there wasn't a dry eye in the room. Many of these people hadn't known one another before that morning. But the stories brought them together and infused the project with passion and insight. The collection of stories emphasized how wide the range is between very bad experiences and very good ones, and reminded them how high the stakes are in getting health care services

right. There's nothing like stories to connect you with a subject, to pull a team together to work on human issues in a human way.

IDEO has worked alongside Minneapolis-based Medtronic for many years—a blue-chip medical technology company that's best known for its market-leading cardiac pacemakers. Medtronic employees are paid well, and many of them are shareholders, so that should be enough to motivate them to do a good job, right? Well, yes, but Medtronic is looking for more than a good job; they want to out-innovate the competition. And they use storytelling as a tool. One of their senior executives told me that whenever the team needed a spark, they would simply bring in patients—or the children of elderly patients—and say, "Please tell us a story about how a Medtronic product changed your life." The result, my friend at Medtronic told me, is positively electric. Because after a few of these life-renewing stories, even the "tough guys" in the room start to get a little teary-eyed, and the entire Medtronic team goes back to work afterward, inspired and motivated to do their absolute best for people like the ones they just met.

No, we aren't always working to save lives or comfort the dying, but most of us believe in the value of what we do. Go out and find some real people. Listen to their stories. Don't ask for the main point. Let the story run its course. Like flowing water, it will find its own way, at its own pace. And if you've got patience, you'll learn more than you might imagine.

Dreaming Up a New Story

Introducing change in a large organization can be tough. It's not enough to dream up new concepts. Sometimes you've got to dream up a new way to tell the story.

A few years ago, we had a challenging assignment from a major car manufacturer. We began with the premise that the automotive industry sometimes considers women as an afterthought. Surprisingly few cars are designed or sold with women in mind, despite the fact that most purchasing decisions are made or influenced by women. With

that clear opportunity, the auto company asked IDEO to plumb new-car ideas for women in their twenties.

We dove into the project with our usual enthusiasm. We recruited female staffers and friends to shop till they dropped at retailers like Urban Outfitters and Origins, immersing themselves in the culture of women's shopping. Of course, they didn't really have to buy. We gave a number of women a fictional budget and sent them out to dealers to "buy" a new car. The dealers ranged from ambivalent to downright nasty. They intimidated the women and tried to take advantage of them. "Come back with your daddy," suggested one sexist auto salesman. Interviewing the women, we learned a few things. The most obvious was that while many women love to shop, most car dealers make them feel miserable. A major lost opportunity. Another obvious discovery was that women in their twenties apparently adore convertibles—eleven of our twelve women had either convertibles or sunroofs in their cars.

But pushing farther below the surface, we found something more subtle. The shopping experiences at home decor shops demonstrated that the women were drawn to something more fundamental than convertibles. What they sought was a certain lightness and whimsy—qualities not found in most modern cars. Meanwhile, our project space for this exploration filled with images and props, everything from fun T-shirts to magazine collages—shots of active young women and heartthrobs, as well as the latest shoes and fashions. Our team got excited about emerging concepts and was anxious to share our findings with the client. But somehow, delivering the standard wire-bound report in a plastic cover seemed flat, given the lively material we were trying to convey.

"Wouldn't it be fun if our report were like one of these magazines?" suggested one of our team members, flipping through one of the dozens of women's magazines that had accumulated in our project space. The attraction was obvious: The chatty, familiar, and casual editorial. The bouncy self-help tone. The sexy design, emphasizing photographs and design over text.

We'd never done it before, but the team got excited about breaking new ground. They modeled their effort after several young women's magazines, especially *Lucky*, with its perfect tag line, "It's all about

shopping." Our "magazine" told the story of what we'd learned about women and cars from our interviewees, observations, and brainstorms. There were personal features with snapshots of our dozen interviewees: who they were, what car experiences they'd had, how they viewed the automotive world. An article on transitions explored one of our major findings—that these women were all going through major lifestyle shifts, from single to married, from adolescent to adult, from club-hopper to mom. An article on influencers described the trusted sources these women turned to for advice or help with life's challenges. Of course, we had great photos of women going through the buying process (our resourceful recruits had no problem inventing a story for why they wanted to visually chronicle the process).

What did our carmaker think? We literally couldn't print enough copies of the thirty-two-page glossy magazine. The company found it different and fun and thought-provoking. It was warmer and more personal than what they were accustomed to. Most important, it raised questions about the critical attributes women found appealing. But our storytelling wasn't complete. As we honed our findings, we settled on key attributes. Concepts like "Haven," the idea that for a young woman just out of college, still living with roommates, the car may be the only place to escape or find quiet comfort. As the project progressed and the concepts became more refined, we searched for a new medium for presenting our ideas. We settled on the metaphor of a user's manual, much like the manual in a car's glove box. A tool kit for designers that explored our vision of the attributes and features women would like to see in a car.

We capped off the project with a four-minute animated video, the story of a woman's car-buying journey—researching online, visiting the showroom and picking out features, and finally, blasting off on a road trip with a roommate. A self-help magazine, a car manual, an animated video—three very unique and focused storytelling vehicles that helped craft our observations and findings into a more actionable form. Don't forget the importance of telling a story. Every team can benefit by being open to considering just what medium might best convey your story. You may not believe the old Marshall McLuhan adage that "the medium is the message," but the right medium can certainly support

and amplify your intended message. Just as you craft your message, give attention to what medium is most likely to get your point across.

Don't Zap That Infomercial

Sometimes stories work best if they shock. So here's what might sound like a shocking idea: If you're looking for new clues to better corporate storytelling, consider a radical source—the much-maligned infomercial.

I haven't lost my mind. I know infomercials have a dicey reputation. But a creative Storyteller keeps an open mind and is willing to find learning in unusual places. Like them or not, television infomercials are a very focused form of modern storytelling. They're phenomenally successful, and they are *not going away.*

The best infomercials work because they build a detailed, persuasive case for the product. It's the same thing companies must do all the time, whether they are advancing a corporate agenda or introducing new services and products to business partners. So what makes a successful infomercial? Johann Verheem, founder of the infomercial firm EQmedia Partners, says you have to build to three mini climaxes before the grand finale. You introduce skepticism or controversy, air common doubts and worries, then knock down the objections one by one. Snicker all you want, but most corporate videos aren't nearly as comprehensive or persuasive as infomercials. Three minutes into a corporate video, they're often still showing how many square feet of warehouses they own, while the infomercial is telling a story that's building dramatic tension.

Part of what has allowed infomercials to "tune" their response rate so successfully is that they have an enviably quick feedback loop—the instantaneous spike of calls into the 800 numbers where "operators are standing by." And no infomercial illustrates the power of instant feedback better than the story of the George Foreman grill. When first introduced by Salton without its celebrity endorsement, the new barbecue grill was met by lackluster sales. Even when retired boxer George Foreman made the first commercial, it was still not an

instant success. Then, in a candid, informal moment, Foreman grabbed a burger off the grill and took a hungry bite, seemingly not conscious of the camera. When that authentic moment was introduced into the next airing of the infomercial, the switchboard lit up like Times Square. Sales went through the roof, and that *Candid Camera* moment has appeared in every infomercial for the product since.

Of course, I'm not suggesting that you directly mimic infomercials. But the reality is that a lot of organizational storytelling remains stuck in the corporate-video syndrome—flat, doubt-provoking, and occasionally mind-numbing renditions of company objectives. They desperately need help. So if you've got a high-stakes story to tell and a limited time to do it, screen some great commercials, films, and yes, even infomercials. Take what works, lose the rest, and come up with something distinctive that brings new energy to your stories.

Beyond the Fortune Cookie

Great stories work in all shapes and sizes. The power of storytelling is what drives the sales of millions of fortune cookies every year. Otherwise, it would be hard to understand the runaway success of fortune cookies. Let's face it: They're not on any food critic's list of "top ten taste treats," and they have a texture like injection-molded plastic. There's nothing wrong with their classic look, but it certainly doesn't promise culinary delight or even comfort-food indulgence. So what explains their enduring popularity? Why, the *fortune*, of course. Fortune cookies are about 10 percent cookie, 90 percent experience, and we all love the ritual of figuring out who belongs to which cookie, then breaking them open with a crisp, satisfying snap and reading the fortunes aloud to everyone at the table. It's simple. It's fun. It's a shared experience.

So have you noticed the fortune-cookie phenomenon spreading to other venues? The first place I spotted fortunes without the cookie was at Palomino restaurants (there's one across the street from IDEO San Francisco). Just like in a Chinese restaurant, Palomino presents each diner with a fortune when they deliver the bill (presumably as a way

to soften the blow). The fortune cards at Palomino required a little work to open—tearing off three perforated edges—which was part of the fortune-cookie-like ritual. Their fun little fortunes give closure to the meal as, one by one, diners share the bits of wisdom inside.

Having jumped from East to West, fortune-cookie wisdom then jumped from food to drink. In case you haven't noticed, most high-end juice and iced tea drinks—especially the ones in glass bottles—use the inside of their metal caps as a tiny media opportunity. Honest Tea taps into wisdom of the ages like a fortune cookie, though the quotes are a bit more contemporary than Confucius. Last time I drank an Honest Tea, the sage they quoted was Lily Tomlin, who reminds us, "Even if you win the rat race, you're still a rat." The few words in these fortunes would barely qualify as a story, but they are often conversation starters, setting off a chain reaction of personal stories among friends and colleagues.

Jumping on the storytelling-anywhere bandwagon, IDEO suggested it might be possible to print riddles or interesting facts on a Pringles potato chip using food-based inks. Sure enough, P&G came up with a clever way to do it, teaming up with the folks from Trivial Pursuit for some of the content. It's a small step in the chain of innovations that sprang from the fortune cookie, but it did turn eating Pringles into a fun social event. And it increased their market share by 14 percent in the first year.

Can you use storytelling or teaching on a micro level to cement the bond with your customers? Could your vehicle entertain or teach me a little something every time I start it up? Could your elevator tell me a story that I could use in today's meeting? Could your mobile network connect me to just the right version of a dial-a-story? Because even the smallest stories can go a long way toward making your service or product a little more exceptional.

Seven Reasons to Tell Stories

Why should organizations care about becoming better Storytellers? Well, we've given that question a lot of thought. Roshi Givechi of our

San Francisco office even formed an IDEO advocacy group to share our latest insights on how storytelling aids innovation projects.

Here are seven reasons she believes organizations should care about becoming better Storytellers.

1 **Storytelling builds credibility.**
We often tell stories about firsthand field research during our initial client meeting. Even though the client may have decades of experience in their industry, the immediacy of our first-person narrative (drawn from recent observations) offers credibility, even if—maybe *especially* if—it goes against the client's sense of the market. Passion and a fresh perspective demand respect. The client may know a particular market, but the Storyteller with an intriguing first-person narrative is the world expert on their own experiences.

2 **Storytelling unleashes powerful emotions and helps teams bond.**
Captivating stories trigger emotional responses that frequently spark valuable insights. As I mentioned earlier, we'll often kick off a project by asking clients to tell stories about particularly positive or negative service experiences. We've had participants cry when talking about extraordinarily good—and noticeably bad—encounters. By the time everyone's had a laugh or a nod of recognition, the team is stronger and more focused. You'd be surprised. Even executives fond of a left-brain, analytical approach can get pretty fired up about a story that cuts to the essential human questions.

3 **Stories give "permission" to explore controversial or uncomfortable topics.**
Sometimes we invite team members to try a little show-and-tell: to bring in a favorite object and tell us a story about it. One client recently brought in a mountaineer's ice pick to symbolize his belief in his product's need for dependability, reliability, and trust. Most likely, he would have been uncomfortable discussing such "touchy-feely" concepts in the abstract, but in the

context of a story, it felt very natural to do so. Storytelling can act as a kind of Trojan horse, getting past our initially defensive reactions of doubt or skepticism, enabling us to have an open discussion about a relevant idea.

4 **Storytelling sways a group's point of view.**
We aren't opposed to studying demographics, industry dynamics, and market trends. But facts alone provide little direction or inspiration for a new project. A compelling story can serve as a parable that helps shape a group's perspective. Most great leaders have used storytelling as a part of their strategy for success—in ancient times around evening fires, and now using all the modern communication options that are available to them.

5 **Storytelling creates heroes.**
The observations that inspire so much of our innovation work are often grounded in the stories of real people—customers or would-be customers with needs that aren't met by today's products or services. These individuals give a name and often a face to the design objectives of a project. You'll often hear team members say, "Would that help Lisa?" Sometimes we'll combine elements of these real people and, as in the movies, create a composite embodying most of our objectives in one fictionalized character. These characters give us a hero—someone to innovate for.

6 **Storytelling gives you a vocabulary of change.**
One of my goals when I speak before corporate audiences is to introduce new concepts and spark new conversations that encourage innovation. Many of the best business books of the past twenty-five years have introduced new phraseology into the boardrooms and meeting rooms of the world. For example, Malcolm Gladwell popularized the phrase "tipping point" in the late 1990s, Clayton Christensen gave us "disruptive technologies," and Geoffrey Moore got businesspeople talking about "crossing the chasm." At IDEO, our best stories are generously

seeded with phrases and words that provide new frameworks for innovation efforts. Internally, we talk about "T-shaped people" using "design thinking" to come up with breakthroughs in "Phase zero" of a "think-to-build" project. Some of a firm's language is self-explanatory, while other expressions are a bit obscure, but the words in our stories reinforce concepts and accelerate the diffusion of innovation. Language is crystallization of thought, so the stories matter, and so do the words.

Good storytelling cuts through the clutter.

7 **Good stories help make order out of chaos.**
We have too many items on our to-do list, too many voice-mail messages, and too many unread e-mails. We cope in part by developing a protective form of attention-deficit disorder that allows us to jump from subject to subject—to screen out, ignore, neglect, or actively forget what would otherwise overwhelm. Good storytelling cuts through the clutter. Think back a few years: Most likely you will have trouble remembering a specific e-mail or phone conversation. But I bet you can remember a good story told to you by your parents long ago, or by your first boss or your best friend. Telling stories is one of the ways you begin building a relationship—whether it's in life or business.

Touring Tales

Finally, don't forget that one of the best opportunities to tell a story is all around you. Your physical space has the potential to communicate important stories in ways that no PowerPoint presentation could ever match.

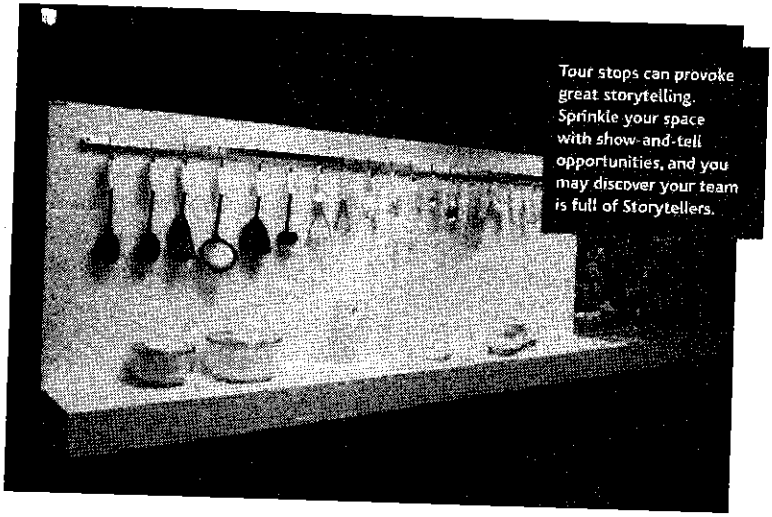
An IDEO tour for clients or invited guests is a common occurrence. It's not quite like the Universal Studios tour, but apparently it does have some information and entertainment value. I've led more than a thousand client tours myself in the past eighteen years, and the feedback is that tours are worthwhile. What makes up a tour? IDEOers take

a handful of guests around the campus, using the spaces and artifacts they encounter to trigger relevant stories, in the way that "story beads" help guide Native American storytellers through a series of tales. We've got several "storytelling entrances," places you'll find some of the favorite products and services we've worked on during the years, as well as our Materials Bar and Tech Box. There are waypoints along the way that represent case studies, pieces of the creative process, or insights we think are worth sharing. During the tour, we also wander through the eclectic offices, giving visitors a sense of how we work and what we do.

Why does the tour remain so rich and vibrant? I used to think it was our ever-changing space, which admittedly doesn't resemble most company offices, and the wide range of colorful and visual examples of our work. More recently, I realized that it stays fresh mainly because there's no script, no set path, no official tour stops. It's entirely an oral tradition. Of my thousand or more tours, no two were quite the same, and my colleagues give a tour that is different again from any of mine. We believe you shouldn't let one or two specialists deliver all your tours—whether your company makes teddy bears or computer chips. You need a wide range of personalities if you want your storytelling to remain varied and fresh.

A good tour not only shows off your company's accomplishments but also can enrich your culture of storytelling and boost your team's morale. There's something special about working in a place distinctive enough to make outsiders want to come and have a look. And that's part of why the storytelling value of a good tour can't be matched by mere PowerPoint. There's no substitute for a firsthand experience.

During the last several years, I've noticed that companies are getting markedly better at setting the stage for their tours. A while back, I got a guided tour of Sony's Media World atop their headquarters building in Shinagawa, which I would rate among the best office tours in the world. It's like a year-round trade show of the near-term future in consumer and "prosumer" electronics. I admit, however, that I was a bit disappointed when I went back two years later and neither the technologies nor the stories seemed to have changed. The problem with investing so incredibly much in the tour is that they have to amortize their invest-



Tour stops can provoke great storytelling. Sprinkle your space with show-and-tell opportunities, and you may discover your team is full of Storytellers.

ment over a long period of time. Our tour is much less polished, but our minimal investment allows us to tinker with it continuously.

Once you've built a stage, you need talented and enthusiastic people to deliver your tour. If it's fun, if the stops on the tour and the staffers you encounter give you a charge, you won't have any trouble recruiting and retaining tour guides. My biggest suggestion is to allow each Storyteller the freedom to shape their own tour, with their own favorite stops and little asides. That way the thousandth tour may be as spontaneous and inspired as the first. And you'll find the tour takes on a life of its own.

No matter what stories you tell—whether they are tours of your cool offices, or video prototypes of new services you're developing, remember the first rule of Storytellers: Keep it authentic and entertaining. Strike an emotional chord. Make it a story people will want to pass on. Because stories are a part of your personal legacy and the essence of your authentic brand.