

Telling your signature story

[Business](#), [Company](#)



The following excerpt is from Karen Tiber Leland's book . Buy it now from | |

Years ago I worked with a woman who was a vice president of finance for a high-tech series C startup in Silicon Valley. We were updating her bio in preparation for an upcoming speech. When I asked why she didn't want to use her current bio, she said, " The problem with my old bio is that it highlights the fact that I used to be a chiropractor. I don't want to say that."

" Why not?" I asked.

" It just seems weird that I used to be a chiropractor, and now I'm a VP of finance."

" Tell me what you used to do as a chiropractor," I said.

As she described her work as a chiropractor, it occurred to me that there was a parallel between her previous and current vocations.

" So let me see if I understand this," I said. " As a chiropractor, you examined the system of the body and brought what was not working optimally into alignment. As a VP of finance, you examine the financial system of your company and ensure that it's working optimally in alignment. Would that be fair to say?"

" Yes," she replied.

" So it's a different system, but a similar skill set. Did you learn anything as a chiropractor that has helped you in your current job as a VP of finance?"

" Absolutely," she replied, and explained how.

From my perspective, this connection was an integral part of her Signature Story; it also made her a much more interesting and engaging person. I recommended that she not only include her previous occupation in her bio but also integrate into her speech the parallels between being a chiropractor and a VP of finance.

As with all the other core elements of the Brand Mapping Process©, the Signature Story applies equally to your personal, team or business brand -- and there will be times when the primary means through which you share about your brand will be your Signature Story. It answers the question “ How did you get here?” And, anecdotally, it highlights your contribution and competencies. Some of the qualities of an effective Signature Story include the following.

1. Authenticity. A Signature Story that’s based on exaggeration (or even worse, lies) is neither effective nor ethical. However, a narrative rooted in reality has the power of authenticity behind it. No matter how boring or insignificant you think yours might be, there’s always a grain of greatness to be found in every legitimate Signature Story.

2. Serendipity. We’ve all heard some version of this story from a newly married couple: “ If I hadn’t been on that business trip to London, bent over to pick up an umbrella, threw out my back, gone to the hospital for an X-ray and ran into her in the hospital cafeteria, we would never have met. It was meant to be.”

Everyone enjoys hearing how, at some level, things unfold in the perfect way and at the perfect time. A well-told Signature Story illustrates how your personal or business brand in part came into being through fate, fortune, coincidence or grace.

3. Specifics. In writing, we have a saying: “ Show, don’t tell.” A Signature Story gives you the opportunity to highlight specific aspects of your brand through example, rather than declaration.

A moment of truth in Cambodia

Here’s just one section of the Signature Story from Elizabeth Sheehan, founder and president of Care 2 Communities:

“ At 32, on the edge of a minefield in Cambodia, my world broke open. I was there training aid workers when a distraught local grandmother pulled me toward a tiny hut. Inside, in near darkness, I could feel the heat from the wall and smell the fear and blood. I could hardly make out the frail woman who had just delivered a tiny infant. As she lay still on the dirt floor, I noticed the sarong underneath her body growing darker. She was bleeding to death -- from postpartum hemorrhage. The number-one killer of women after birth, it’s preventable -- but deadly if not treated.

“ I watched as her small children clung to each other in the shadows and knew their fate was as tragic as hers. Motherless children fare poorly; the mother, their soul, the glue, was fading away. I had nothing she needed -- not a clinic, medicine or blood. I stood by helpless, tears

mixed with sweat pouring down my face as she passed away before my eyes.”

Sheehan goes on to explain that this was the moment that forever cemented her commitment to developing innovative and sustainable models that change the way healthcare is delivered in the developing world. Today, her nonprofit organization, Care 2 Communities offers high-quality, affordable health care through clinics that begin to sustain themselves in just a few years. In the past five years alone, they have cared for more than 42, 000 patients.

Writing your 'Signature Story'

Now it's your turn. You'll need at least 20 minutes for this exercise. Sit in a quiet place, and make some notes about the following for either you or your business:

- *History of your significant past jobs, clients and/or projects.* This can include game-changing assignments that propelled you to a whole new level in your business or off on a different path altogether. What have you learned from these that you use today?
- *Experiences you've had that shape who you are and what you do today.* These experiences won't necessarily all be positive. In fact, some of the most powerful Signature Stories center on seemingly negative experiences that ultimately contained a great gift.
- *People you've encountered along the way who've influenced who you have become.* This can include mentors, company founders, family, friends, authors, clients, teachers or random strangers on the subway.

- *Talents, skills and abilities you've gained through your unique history.*

These are the tangible by-products of the life/career you have experienced so far.

Now go through your notes and shape them into a narrative that tells your story chronologically. This isn't a laundry list of your accomplishments but rather the story of the significant people, places and things that have shaped your personal or business brand.