

# Provocation Deep Dive

## Why storytelling isn't effective

with Jeff Molander

Founder  Communications Edge



Markus Spiske

Welcome to lesson 4 in our Provocation Deep Dive: Why Storytelling isn't very effective lately -- and what to do instead. One more time let me set the specific context: Early stages of sales outreach. Whether you're working warm leads from trade shows or inbound marketing... or reaching out to cold contacts. Conventional wisdom dictates: Storytelling builds a human connection. Sharing stories and best practices helps communicate a business objective in a way people relate to better. But there's a problem with this strategy. I get it. Because people like to listen to stories, they can relate to them. Product features are boring unless customers clearly envision using them to their advantage. Nobody wants to listen to bragging about a company, service, how good you are. They prefer knowing what your service can do for them and how it will help their business. Full stop. Effectiveness of stories presumes you have an interested listener. You must be asked to tell it.

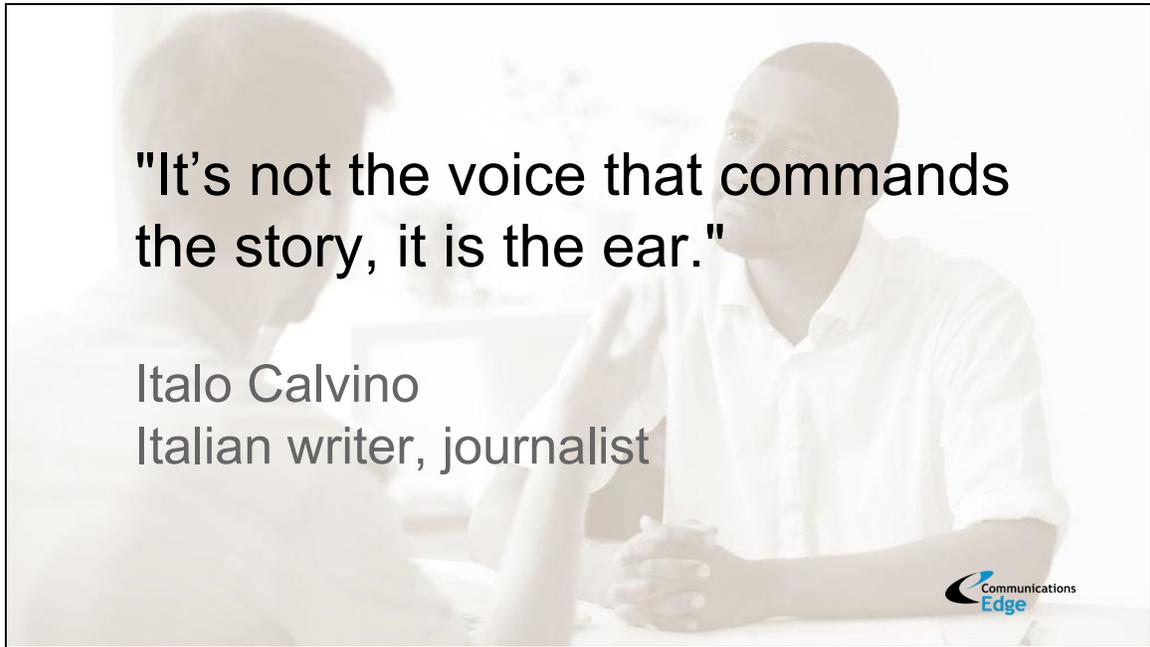
Slide 2



You need an attentive, curious audience. They must be piqued. Yes. Develop good story telling skills. But **\*first\*** make sure you can tell it -- to a worthwhile audience. Develop the skill putting you in the position to tell effective stories.



So next time you read some sales expert saying "Rather than selling a service, focus on the value it brings and the human experience. Tell a story..." Consider: How do I get in the position to tell the story -- to someone who WANTS to listen?" How are you going to get that person to stop doing what they're doing -- and actively listen to you? ARE you going to? Because you can be the best storyteller in the world. Without someone who wants to listen it's a monologue.

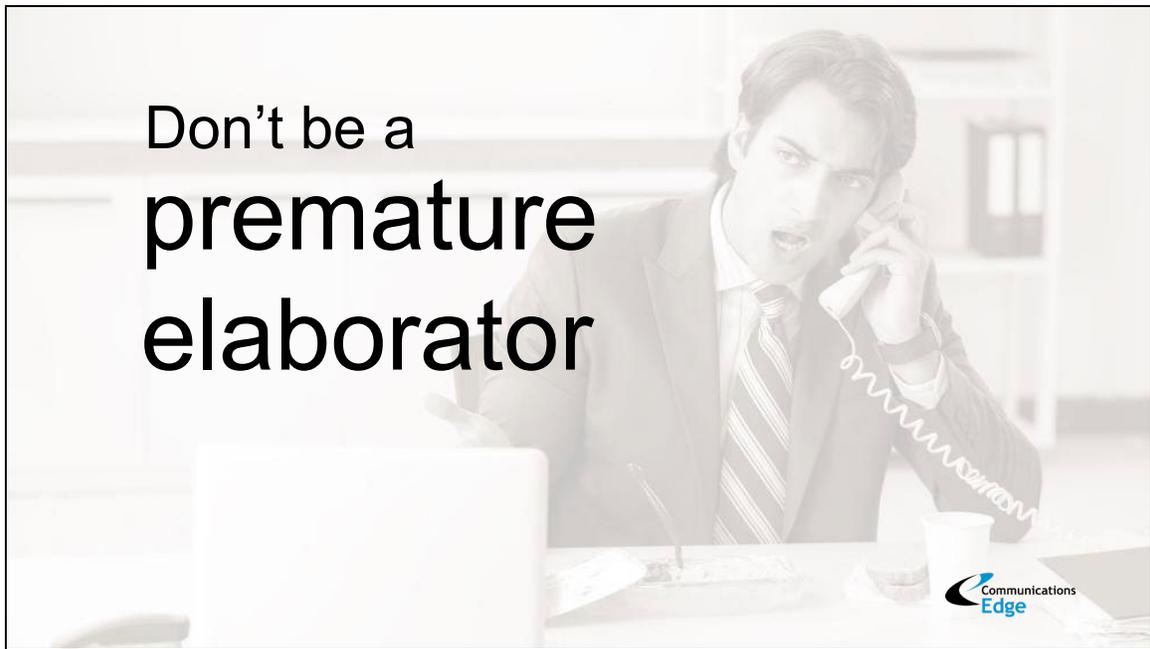


"It's not the voice that commands  
the story, it is the ear."

Italo Calvino  
Italian writer, journalist



Said more eloquently, it's not the voice that commands the story. It is the ear.



Said more crudely, don't be a premature elaborator! Ok. We all have stories to tell. Unless you're a start up. But even then, you need success stories. Stories about the value you provide customers. We tell stories to demonstrate and motivate. Demonstrate value and motivate behavior.

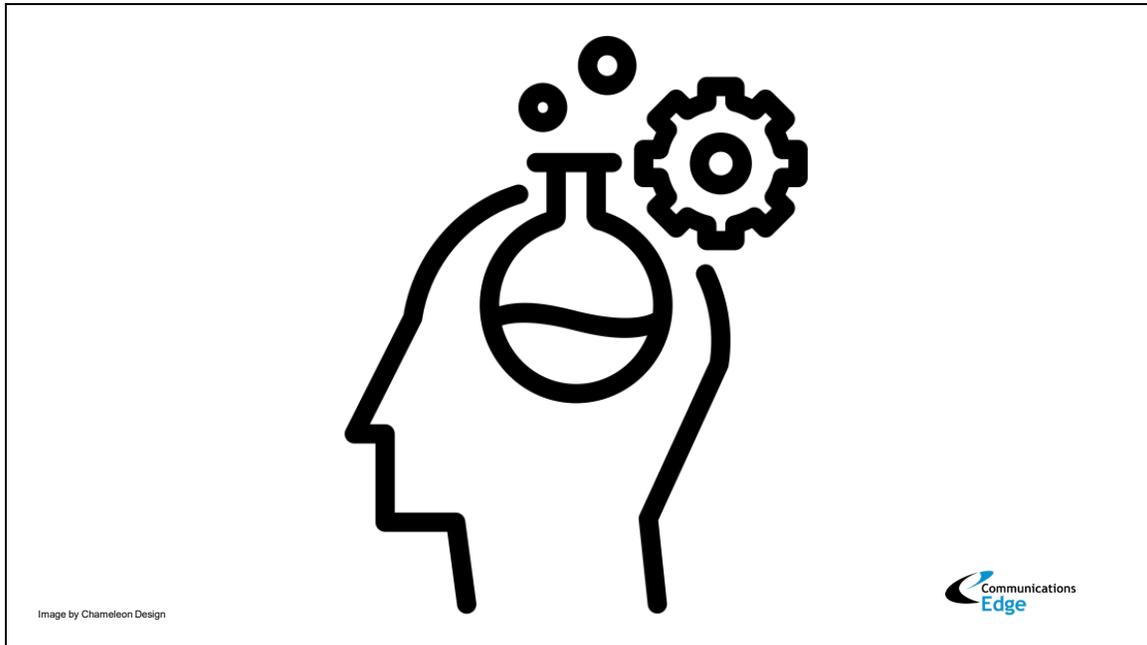
**demonstrate value**  
**motivate behavior**



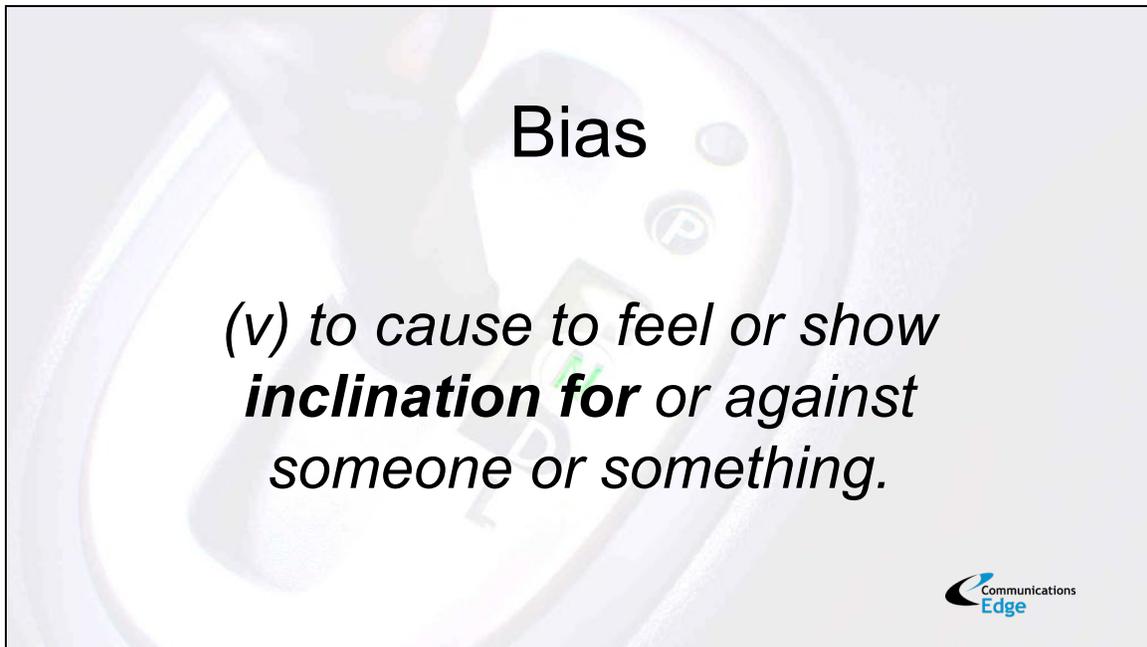
Demonstrate value and motivate behavior. What kind of behavior? Behavior that results in a sale. Whoops. There we go again. Getting back to that one, nagging issue: Bias.



Here's what I mean: Your message isn't neutral enough. And here's what's causing this. Because I can tip you to death and hand out templates for you to copy. But this isn't going to fix your problem. The reason your stories may be falling on deaf ears is this: You probably believe potential customers want to know, "what's in it for me." But they don't. Conventional marketing wisdom is not applicable here in sales copywriting. Crafting stories and social proof (testimonials) addressing "what's in it for me" doesn't work because you have not: 1) earned the right to tell the story and 2) helped the prospect want to hear it. As stupid obvious as it sounds this is WHY stories we tell don't earn conversations. Customers don't care "what's in it for them." They don't care. Period!



For a customer to think, “What’s in it for me?” requires them to have already been provoked... they must already be curious and interested to listen. Most stories are being told by marketers and sellers too soon. Plus, they are too biased. Result: The story’s persuasiveness vanishes. Now I’ll show you examples in just a moment. But be sure: This is a mental shift... a transformation in how you think. And it requires a commitment to a new belief system. And it’s not for everyone because what we do in the Academy is a practice. It’s a never-ending experiment. It also evolves over time.... what piques customers’ curiosity today won’t tomorrow. So you’ve got to have an endless supply of better ways. I’m giving you the better way. But you must be willing to understand the psychological reasons -- why your message won’t start enough conversations. Then you can take concepts I show you and apply them. Successfully. If you do you’ll be able to evolve the practice over time. But applying the better tactics requires, first, being able to a) see weaknesses in your message... and b) understanding the behavioral psychology behind why those weak spots are weak.



# Bias

*(v) to cause to feel or show  
**inclination for or against**  
someone or something.*



Bias is a big part of the problem in most sales outreach. Now you might think, “Molander, I don’t need to understand... I need to know what to do and move on... get back to my day. Get to the point please.” I appreciate your attitude and I, also, need to get back to my day. Bias in your messages is probably causing prospects to feel your inclination for serving your goal... earning a meeting, placing a solution, giving a demo. And that’s turning them off. Ok. Back to storytelling: when do you tell stories and how well do you tell them? Because how well you demonstrate value in a story determines how much behavior you’ll motivate. Today, let’s examine how to best demonstrate the value you can provide to prospects... so you can motivate the behavior you’re looking for. Of course, HOW you go about PRESENTING value depends on your context:

# Marketing vs. Sales



case study  
white paper

vs.



outreach email



Marketing or Sales. Are you writing a case study or white paper?





In marketing context you tell stories to illustrate value... paint the picture... where the desired outcome may be soft... to motivate the prospect to consider contacting the seller directly.



But on the sales side you the story should trigger interest in speaking with the sales rep. This is where you send sales outreach messages to start a conversation. The goal is to earn a reply to your email. Ok. So let's consider the storytelling tools in your arsenal...

## Storytelling tools

- Testimonials (“social proof”)
- Case studies
- Claims (usual value)



Testimonials offer social proof: Your product or service does what it says it will do. Maybe it exceeds customers' expectations. Testimonials vividly explain the benefits you are providing current, happy clients. But they should be doing more. Most testimonials are without the most powerful element: Initial doubt of your customer. Yes, doubt. More on that in a moment. #2 case studies. Actual stories which capture your customers' problems and how you helped them overcome them. And #3 claims. Broad claims of the usual value you deliver to customers. These are not as strong as case studies or testimonials but can be effective when used thoughtfully. Provocatively. Ok. Challenges.

## Storytelling challenges

- Timing (no context, permission, hunger)



The biggie is timing: The wrong timing of your story. This happens when you tell stories out of context.. without permission and without helping the customer develop a hunger to hear the story. The timing feels forced on their side. Remember the rule: People value more what they ASK for, less what you freely offer. For example: Testimonials are powerful -- when offered in context of an established conversation. A discussion where both sides are willing participants. That's why testimonials are most effective during the consideration phase of buying. However, showing prospects your existing customers praise -- too early in the courtship -- risks being seen as trying to push too hard... like you're trying to bypass the prospect inviting you to share the story. Time for an example submitted by Kate.

FROM: Kate  
SUBJECT: Why wait?  
SUBJECT: You could be saving millions now  
SUBJECT: Your employees will thank you

A few days back you received a report from me laying out how you could realistically save 100s, 1000s, even millions of dollars on your firm's employee healthcare benefits program.

SIHRA provides your employees and their families the freedom to choose a medical plan with 100% coverage – making your company's healthcare coverage a competitive advantage as a magnet for recruiting and a handcuff for keeping your most valuable talent happy and secure.

SIHRA is simple to put into place, easy to administer, and doesn't require any changes whatsoever to existing plans, payers, consultants or vendors.

And employees love the increased benefits and cost savings this program provides - as a result of eliminating their out-of-pocket expenses, they are able to pay off other bills and debts, receive needed medical care that may otherwise have been difficult to get, and improve the overall quality of their lives.

"The premium with my husband's insurance is significantly less which allows us to bring home more money each pay period. Both insurances are on file with my Pharmacy and to date we have had zero out-of-pocket costs. I was unfortunate enough to have kidneys stones this year--- ultrasound, CT Scan, MD visits--- zero out-of-pocke! My husband has been seen by an orthopedic provider and is in physical therapy and we have had no out-of-pocket expenses!"

— Andrea R.

Imagine how YOUR employees will feel when you can offer them a comprehensive solution to their fears of rising healthcare costs that delivers better care and saves them real money.

Imagine how YOU will feel when you have a solution that frees up potentially millions of dollars in currently locked-down capital, unleashing it for use in whatever areas you deem most beneficial, such as marketing, technology, infrastructure, personnel.

It's possible – and the only thing necessary to make this happen is schedule your FREE "Catalize Results" Consultation today.

Go to [www.NNN.com](http://www.NNN.com) now or simply call XXX-XXX-XXXX and let's get started.



Kate is with Catilize Health ... a professional benefit administrator of the Medical Expense Reimbursement Plan -- also known as SIHRA. She helps businesses save thousands or even millions of dollars on healthcare benefits programs. Without getting into the details... and this email has many weak spots which we don't have time to address... here is the testimonial being shared by Kate. Here's the context: marketing...demand generation. This is one of a series of messages being sent to prospects in support of Craig, who is the sales rep. Kate says the goal is to help Craig earn a meeting... a free consultation. So if a customer invests in SIHRA their employees can eliminate out-of-pocket expenses and invest that recovered money in other places. So let's zoom in here...

“The premium with my husband’s insurance is significantly less which allows us to bring home more money each pay period. Both insurances are on file with my Pharmacy and to date we have had zero out-of-pocket costs. I was unfortunate enough to have kidneys stones this year--- ultrasound, CT Scan, MD visits---- zero out-of-pocket! My husband has been seen by an orthopedic provider and is in physical therapy and we have had no out-of-pocket expenses!”

– Andrea R.



Zooming in here... where we see a pretty lengthy testimonial. It's going to take some time to read it. That said it's in a great tone of voice... coming from one of Catilize's customers... and employee who is the end beneficiary of Catilize's product. I'll ask you to pause the video at this point and give it a look.... So this is offered as a proof of how beneficial SIRAH is to Catilize's customers internal customers... employees. That's fine. But the testimonial would land its punch better if it is, 1) offered only after a decision-maker requests it and 2) provides a testimonial from a customer... an actual decision-maker... confirming the same benefits as seen here ... and then 3) adding in another element. The doubt element. So here's the problem with testimonials...

## The problem with testimonials

They're like resumes

- present one side
- require validation (extra effort)
- exaggerate
- aren't believable enough



Testimonials are like resumes. Resumes are all created to make the candidate look wonderful. They're one-sided. What's the first thing a company does when you present them with a résumé? They go back and do some digging. The smarter the company, and the more important the job, the more the company digs. That validation takes effort. But why does the company check back on the résumé? Because they want to see the complete picture. Just like your customers do too. Most testimonials resemble résumés: Every testimonial seems to talk about the 'magnificent, outstanding, and amazing' qualities of the product or service. And after you've read a couple of those icky-sweet testimonials, you feel like you've had enough. You're getting a massive overdose of 'sugar'. Those testimonials are so sugar-laden there's no way you're going to believe them. So here's a way to make testimonials believable and powerful. When we're considering a purchase, we feel out of our depth. We need some reassurance. And testimonials, sugary as they are, reassure us. But what if you had a more believable testimonial? A testimonial that shows us the 'after' scenario -- and reveals the 'before'. A testimonial with the complete picture.

## The Reverse Testimonial

Focuses on doubt to jack up believability

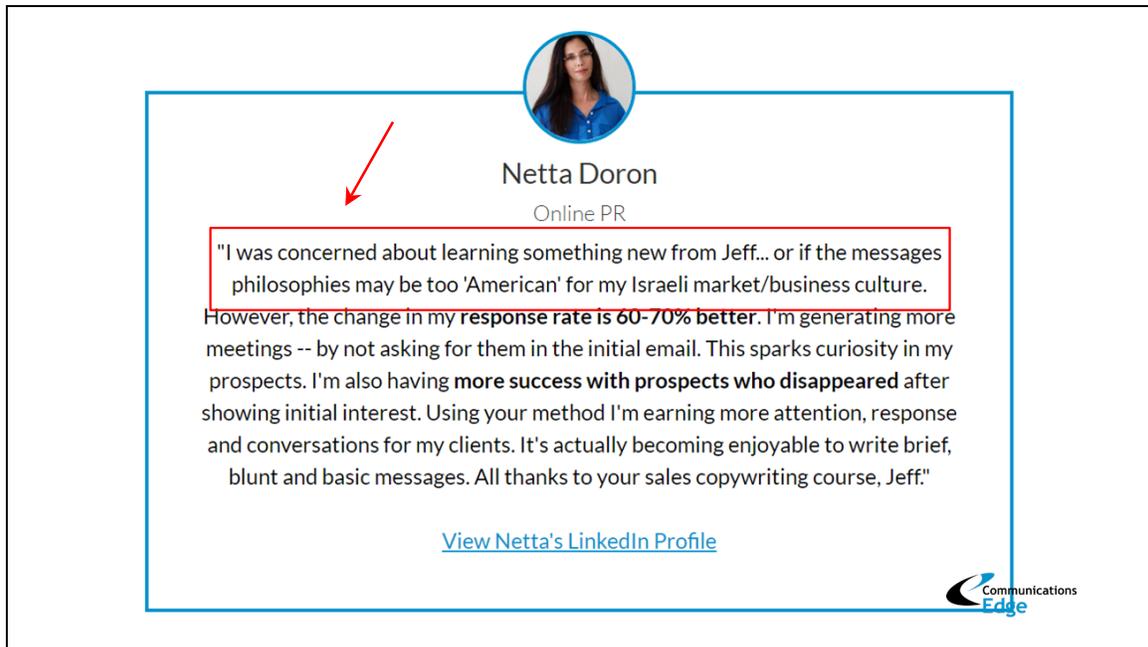
- first, presents the other (skeptical) side
- specific fears, uncertainty
- stand out!



Presenting the ‘reverse testimonial!’ Most testimonials start off with praise, and continue with the praise of a product/service. But a reverse testimonial talks about doubt. It starts with skepticism first. It describes the fear or uncertainty racing through the customer’s mind at the moment of purchase. A reverse testimonial really works because it stands out... it breaks the pattern of what readers expect. They expect the sugar but end up getting the sour. This is SO authentic. Because the testimonial speaks to us in the way we speak to each other. honestly. More completely. Example: When we’re recommending a restaurant, or a movie to a friend or a colleague, we naturally lace our recommendations with doubt.

“You know that seedy-looking restaurant, and how you don’t feel like going inside? They’ve got the most amazing food.”

“You know that fancy looking restaurant you think may be over-priced? We went last night, and had the most delicious food, and the bill was less than expected.”





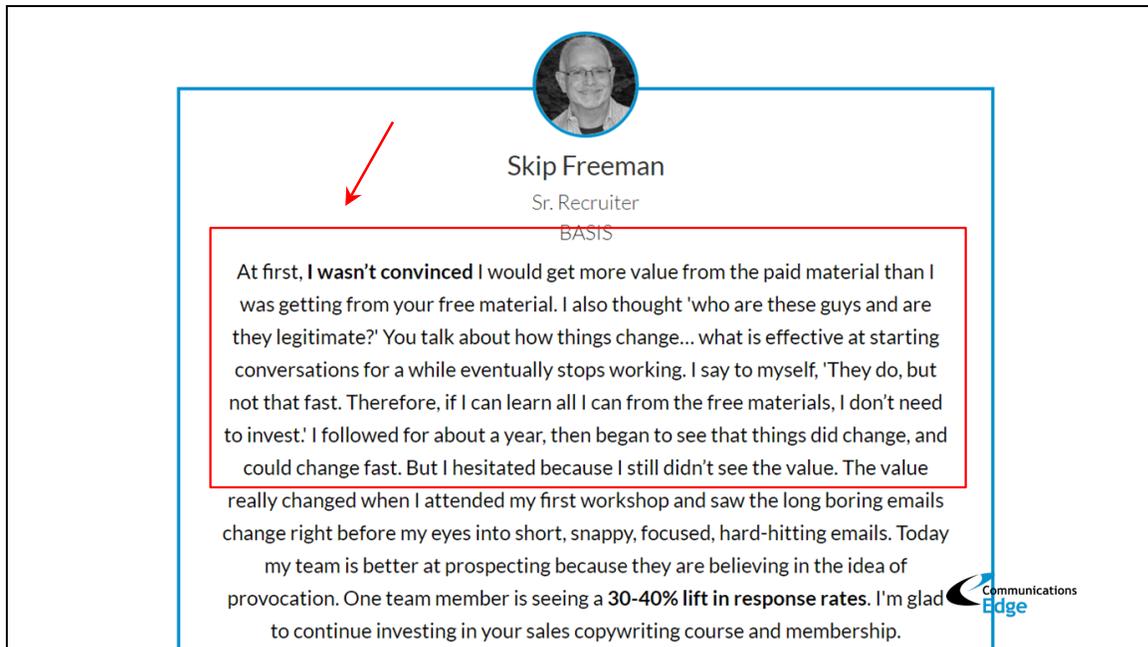
**Netta Doron**  
Online PR

"I was concerned about learning something new from Jeff... or if the messages philosophies may be too 'American' for my Israeli market/business culture. However, the change in my **response rate is 60-70% better**. I'm generating more meetings -- by not asking for them in the initial email. This sparks curiosity in my prospects. I'm also having **more success with prospects who disappeared** after showing initial interest. Using your method I'm earning more attention, response and conversations for my clients. It's actually becoming enjoyable to write brief, blunt and basic messages. All thanks to your sales copywriting course, Jeff"

[View Netta's LinkedIn Profile](#)



So here's an example from one of our customers who said she was concerned, at first, about the "American-ness" of the principles we teach and practice. For our business this is a big point of concern that causes international customers to hesitate. From Australia to Asia to Middle East to Europe to Africa... it's a big issue for our business. So we use Netta's experience ... her total experience... to nip it in the bud.





**Skip Freeman**  
Sr. Recruiter  
BASIS

At first, I **wasn't convinced** I would get more value from the paid material than I was getting from your free material. I also thought 'who are these guys and are they legitimate?' You talk about how things change... what is effective at starting conversations for a while eventually stops working. I say to myself, 'They do, but not that fast. Therefore, if I can learn all I can from the free materials, I don't need to invest.' I followed for about a year, then began to see that things did change, and could change fast. But I hesitated because I still didn't see the value. The value really changed when I attended my first workshop and saw the long boring emails change right before my eyes into short, snappy, focused, hard-hitting emails. Today my team is better at prospecting because they are believing in the idea of provocation. One team member is seeing a **30-40% lift in response rates**. I'm glad to continue investing in your sales copywriting course and membership.



Same with Skip who's in the recruiting and staffing business. He goes into more detail about his initial skepticism... gory details. Even questioning our company's credibility.

## Time your story

- Consider context
- Create hunger
- Earn permission to tell it



So time your story to have maximum impact. Consider the context. Testimonials are most effective during the consideration phase of buying. Don't show them until you've created enough hunger for them to be appreciated. Earn permission to tell the story. By saying, "here's what our customers say about us" before the prospect is ready to consider a discussion (at all!) you look clumsy at best. "We're great at what we do -- here's the proof" requires the right context to interject such comments. The prospect needs to invite you to share! Otherwise they're not invested in your story.

## Storytelling challenges

- Timing (no context, permission, hunger)
- Copywriting pitfalls



Ok. Next challenge are general pitfalls: For example, referring to yourself (at all) when telling a story. Referring to yourself explicitly as the hero. “Thanks to our solution” or “Thanks to investing in \_\_\_\_ ABC client achieved XYZ result.”

# Steve Riley

Founder  
BetterBeer.com LTD



If you've seen our prior workshops you may remember Steve Riley. Steve is a Spark Selling practitioner who is in the business of serving Canadian businesses -- large and small. If you are a bar or restaurant owner with a bar he has an Audit and online training program to sell you.... so you can pour better...cleaner, tastier and safe-to-drink beer. In doing so keeping customers happier... so they return to the restaurant or pub. Let's dive in...

### Situation analysis

- Competitive landscape: No direct competitors, highly niche
- Market segments
  - **Brewers** (main) who underwrite for distributors & retailers as perk
    - Value to brewers: **quality** of product/experience is key!
    - Creates **brand preference** among retailers
- Target market
  - VP ops *or* director of beverages



Competition: None that are direct. He's super niche. Market segments: Brewers, distributors and retailers. Beer brewers invest in Steve's program .. they underwrite it for distributors and retailers as a perk... to keep them loyal to their brand.

Hi Jesse,

Hope all is well. Some of your stores are already using our beer glass cleaner, and as you know, I do the draught quality training for your new stores. I'm looking to get 20 minutes with you to take you through some of the other draught quality solutions we offer and see if there is a fit. We don't clean lines or sell/service equipment - I'm not looking for you to switch suppliers. Recently, we helped Jack Astor's lower their spillage and improve quality.

How is next week, Tuesday morning (Jan 30) or anytime on Thursday (Feb 1)?

Cheers, Steve



Steve wasn't getting any replies with this message... for a variety of reasons. This draft was one of his early attempts at applying spark. But it wasn't a very strong one for sure. All kinds of problems with it. But his instinct was on target: Tell a short story. Use a case example. Fast.

Hi Jesse,

Hope all is well. Some of your stores are already using our beer glass cleaner, and as you know, I do the draught quality training for your new stores. I'm looking to get 20 minutes with you to take you through some of the other draught quality solutions we offer and see if there is a fit. We don't clean lines or sell/service equipment - I'm not looking for you to switch suppliers. **Recently, we helped Jack Astor's lower their spillage and improve quality.**

How is next week, Tuesday morning (Jan 30) or anytime on Thursday (Feb 1)?

Cheers, Steve



Recently, we helped Jack Astor's lower their spillage and improve quality. Two big issues for his ideal customers. And Jack Astor's is a recognizable brand -- and is even competitive to some of his target buyers. But see here? See this dirty little word... we? And this extra word. I hate extra words. You should too. Extra words take extra time to read and tend to over complicate what's being said... make reading it less punchy and clear.

## JEFF'S IMPROVEMENTS

SUBJECT: Jack Astor's

Jesse,

Are you opposed to reducing spillage and improving draught quality---to the extent it hits top and bottom lines? I have an idea. May I run it by you?

Your stores are already using beer glass cleaners. But this leaves \$ on the table. Jack Astor's is seeing lower spillage and higher quality using this tactic. (driving profits)

Open to hearing about how they are doing it?

Cheers, Steve

SHIFT TO NEUTRAL!



So instead we took all the negatives out of this message (and there were many) and moved up the provocative, problem solving part. And made it even more provocative. "Are you opposed to reducing spillage and improving draught quality---to the extent it hits top and bottom lines? I have an idea. May I run it by you?" Boom. Provocative. We're not seeking a yes here. That breaks the pattern of typical messages. We're seeking a "no" to go forward. If you want more help doing this in your messages... and to understand the psychology behind WHY this often works and when to use it get in touch in comments below or via email. We have great resources for you on this strategy. Ok... We aren't going to tell them the idea. We're going to spark curiosity about it... we hope. That's the idea. "Your stores are already using beer glass cleaners. But this leaves \$ on the table. Jack Astor's is seeing lower spillage and higher quality using this tactic. (driving profits)" This particular message was aimed at customers where Steve already had a foot in the door... a loss leader.... the glass cleaners. "Open to hearing about how they are doing it?" Going for the yes obviously. But we ran other campaigns going for no... and, also, asking a more open ended question... facilitative question. The key is to always be experimenting. Bottom line: Do you see how neutral this message is... how different it looks.

Hi Jesse,

Hope all is well. Some of your stores are already using our beer glass cleaner, and as you know, **I do** the draught quality training for your new stores. **I'm looking** to get 20 minutes with you to take you through some of the other draught quality solutions **we offer** and see if there is a fit. **We don't** clean lines or sell/service equipment - **I'm not** looking for you to switch suppliers. Recently, **we helped** Jack Astor's lower their spillage and improve quality.

**How is next week, Tuesday morning (Jan 30) or anytime on Thursday (Feb 1)?**

Cheers, Steve



No meeting request, not giving much detail about what Steve has to offer, using the case example to illustrate the way he solves problems -- using an actual example. All without talking about "me me me." We eliminated the references to himself and his company. This can be hugely powerful believe it or not. Ok. So let me come back to the old mindset. This stuff is poison... toxic.

“I don’t care what you’ve done. I want to know what you can do for me.”



Cold customers... people you have warmed up to you yet... are not thinking, “I don’t care what you’ve done for others. I want to know what you can do for me!” We are tempted to believe this is where your customer’s mindset is -- right now. But it’s not. Beware of this fantasy. Customers don’t want to know what you can do for them. They don’t want you to begin with! They’re actively seeking to avoid you. Unless, of course, they’re a warm lead you’ve developed. But when working in a cold outreach context it’s toxic. But also in follow-up contexts... where clients may be more open to hearing the story... like this example... it can cause problems. This is a great example of premature elaboration.

**FROM JOHN**

Hi xxx,

I hope you found the SMART process document that I shared to be insightful. The beauty of this process is that it's so versatile and timeless that it can be used in any situation and works for all kinds of clients.

Just recently, I received a heartwarming letter from a client, Sara, who wrote to me and told me how the SMART process changed her life by helping her make the right investments at the right time and thereby leading her to achieve her financial goals.

Here's Sara's story where you can learn about how I helped her last through her tough times – when she was about to get fired, her account was losing value, and her social security was yet to kick in – [LINK](#) to the case study [W1]

I love it when I can impact someone's life and help them live the life they wish to lead. Let's get on a quick call, and I can help you evaluate your financial challenges and find the right solutions.

Best,  
John



I'll ask you to hit pause and read this from start to finish.... Notice how self-centered this message is.

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I love it when I can impact someone's life and help them live the life they wish to lead. Let's get on a quick call, and I can help you evaluate your financial challenges and find the right solutions.

Best,  
John



And how at this point John goes on and on about how his heart was warmed by his customer... and how he helped her. And how she wrote to him and told him about how how his product changed her life... by helping her make better investments. All well and good. But the story he's telling is all about him...how he and his product saved the day. That's not the story people are open to hearing. They're more open to hearing the story -- and having their curiosity piqued about... hey, how did you do that for Sara, John? By eliminating all the selfish copy and references here John's story becomes provocative.

“Show how your prospect will feel,  
gain or become something new.”



So next time someone says, “Show how your prospects will feel, gain or become something new” throw a flag. This is a conventional marketing storytelling goal. But this has no place in sales copywriting. It’s easy to show how your prospect will get the benefit. And that’s what we put most of our energy this part. But this often causes us to talk about ourselves. This dilutes the strength of your story. Instead, put more energy in holding back. Take the “you” out. And resist telling stories out of context -- too soon -- and in ways that don’t create curiosity.



**Wrong mindset = wrong tactics**



If you're in the marketing mindset... the wrong mindset... you'll end up using the wrong tactics. Your habits will sabotage you. Instead, break conventional thinking. Consider throwing away your marketing mindset when prospecting. The baby and bathwater must both go... in many cases with your messaging. Because if you don't... I see the results every day with our members: They aren't able to get in front of as many customers.

## Storytelling challenges

- Timing (no context, permission, hunger)
- Copywriting pitfalls
- **Believability**



And finally, believability. Some stories are true -- but sound like bullshit. They sound too good to be true. Prospects resist believing them. Adding a little doubt into your testimonials can help, of course. But what else can be done -- to strengthen stories that sound like exaggerations? It's not an easy task but there are answers.

Subject: open?

Jeff,

Noticing that peptides with acidic residues can be difficult to detect at low levels in LC-MS. It's because of bad peak shape and tailing.

Had an idea for you to address this problem with a way that isn't known about – yet.

To demonstrate, in an example peptide mapping experiment, a peptide with 20% acidic residues showed a 35x higher MS response. The result was an increase in sequence coverage from 90% to 95%.

Open to learning more, Jeff, with a short email exchange?

Thanks for considering,  
Greg



Here's an example from Greg who calls on medical and scientific laboratories.

To demonstrate, in an example peptide mapping experiment, a peptide with 20% acidic residues showed a 35x higher MS response. The result was an increase in sequence coverage from 90% to 95%.

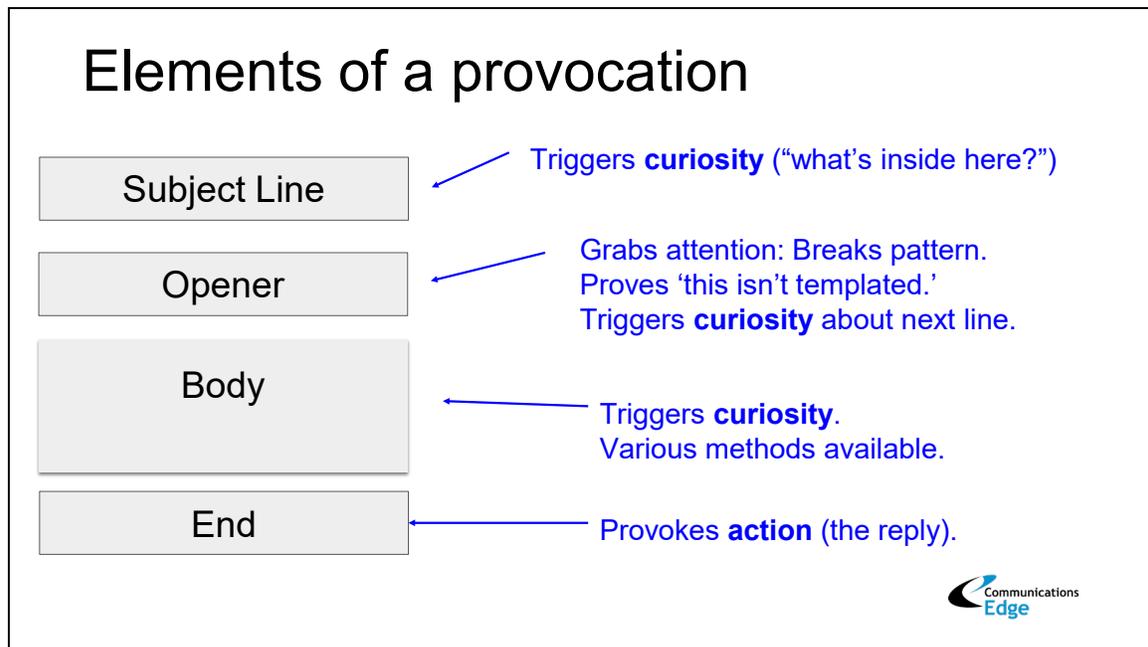
Open to learning more, Jeff, with a short email exchange?



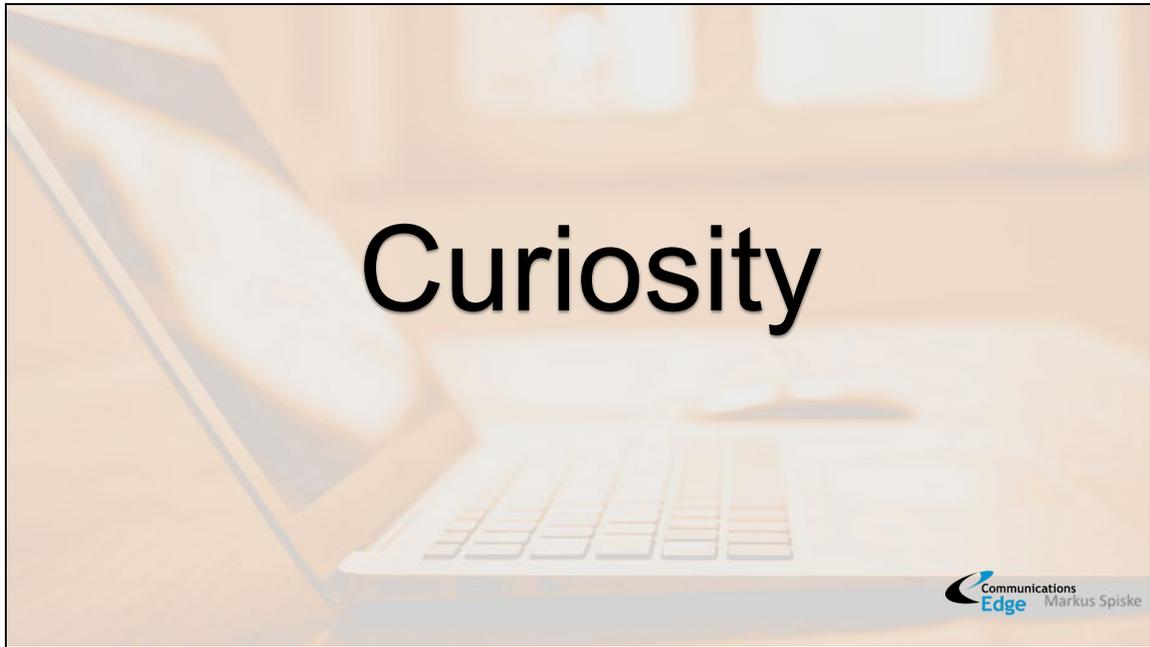
“To demonstrate, in an example peptide mapping experiment, a peptide with 20% acidic residues showed a 35x higher MS response. The result was an increase in sequence coverage from 90% to 95%.” Here, Greg backs up his provocation appearing earlier in the email... with a specific example... a story. He got super specific. This is a great way to enhance believability.



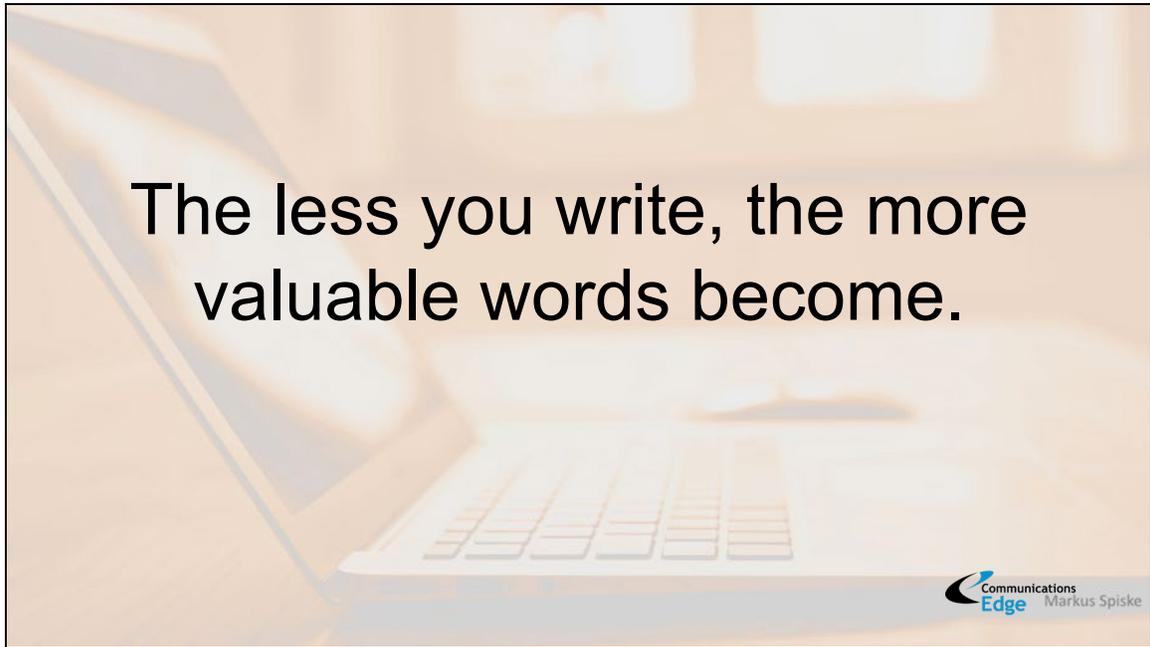
Whether you're going in cold, or chasing a warm inbound lead... create a Pattern Disrupt. Avoid doing what customers expect. Break the pattern. Disrupt what they're used to seeing. Stand out. We all have stories to tell. Stories about the value we provide customers. We tell stories to demonstrate and motivate. Demonstrate value and motivate behavior. What kind of behavior? Behavior that results in a sale. That is what customers expect us to send them. Words biased to the goal we seek. But today you learned how avoiding this kind of tone breaks the pattern... Giving customers space.. so they have the chance to be provoked.



Now there's a lot more to the Spark Selling methodology. It's not brain surgery but there's a lot to learn and practice. The subject must trigger curiosity. The opener grabs attention by breaking the pattern -- we give the reader the feeling...this isn't a cut-and-paste template. We trigger curiosity about the body... where we have a dozen or so tactical options to trigger more curiosity... to provoke. For example, using social proof in the form of a success story.



Sparking curiosity requires sending totally different messages.... messages that stand out from 98% of what everyone else is sending. Likewise, what you should expect to get back from customers is also different. And we discussed typical responses in lesson one in this series.



Remember: The less you write, the more valuable words become. And the more provocative they become.

# See you in lesson #5

## Why educating clients isn't starting enough conversations

Jeff Molander  
Founder



Communications  
Edge



Markus Spiske

Ok with that we'll wrap and see you in lesson 5: Why Educating Clients Isn't Starting Enough Conversations -- And What to Do Instead. We've been told sending helpful content to prospects is an effective way to earn conversations with them... to start the buying journey. But times have changed. Even when information is useful & relevant, the act of offering (without being asked to) will cost you. Instead, you'll take away a copywriting technique to help customers feel the urge to ask. This starts more & better conversations.