What makes stories work?

Last week, I attended a Washington Women In PR (WWPR) panel on "The Art of Storytelling." WWPR's Past President Debbie Friez has a great recap on the BurellesLuce blog.

While I agree with the concept that creating a story will help your organization to connect with its target audience, one thing was not answered. What makes the story work?

Danny Harris of People's District said that stories help "show the texture," which I take to mean give life and detail to otherwise dry and boring concepts. For instance, if I tell you I saw a homeless person on a street corner, that means nothing. But if I tell you that I stopped to talk to the homeless person, and he was able to tell me that because of a health issue he lost his job, and then his house, now you understand the situation. The story fills in the details.

Stories should be memorable, ideally. But then again, not every story, and certainly not corporate stories, is memorable. Stories should aim to create recognition and let you find commonality with them through the details they impart. Yet what details will resonate with your audience?

One thing not one person on the panel said and which I think is absolutely critical for storytelling is this: authenticity.

Although it is a much-vaunted word (especially on social media), authenticity is a concept that is often lacking in marketing communications. When something doesn't ring true it is because it is not authentic. Case in point: my criticism of Pepco's ads about customers being first. Those ads were simply not authentic. Why? Because anyone who has had to deal with Pepco knows that customers are NOT first. Same goes for Comcast (Here is a total aside, I went to Comcast to return equipment and saw a sign that said "Customers are our first priority." Of course, the customer service office was a small

cramped affair where a dozen people were waiting in line for one or two surly customer service reps. Yes, I am sure Comcast puts customers first.)

If you are going to use stories to relay your marketing message you have to be sure they are authentic. People see through the BS. And people who see through it will now have a really bad impression about your organization.

What do you think makes stories work?

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