

CAN STORYTELLING BECOME A BUSINESS?

AN INTERVIEW WITH ASHRAF RAMZY

Speaker at the
Smithsonian Storytelling Weekend
in Washington DC

by

Steve Denning



Can storytelling be turned into a business? Ashraf Ramzy founded a consulting firm based on narrative in The Netherlands in 2002. Ashraf will be one of the international speakers at the [Smithsonian storytelling weekend](#) in Washington DC on April 21-22, 2006. (Ashraf speaks on the Saturday.) Ashraf talked with me this week about his experience to date.

Denning: Ashraf, you launched Narrativity, a consulting firm based on story and located in The Netherlands. What made you do that?

Ramzy: I launched Narrativity in 2002. After some 12 years working in brand & communication strategy at a.o BBDO, I looked back with astonishment. How in the world did I ever reach a director position in marketing and business? How did I ever manage to solve complex issues and handle difficult clients. I hadn't been to business school. I never had a marketing or advertising education. All I had was a master's degree in film and a specialization in narratology; and within narratology, I had specialized in the structures and mythology of the Hollywood Film. On my 40th birthday, I looked back on all my cases and realized I had succeeded using what I had learnt about the laws and logic of the success story.

Yet the last couple of years in advertising left me dissatisfied. Too many clients came in with a briefing, but no story to back it up or to sustain it. And advertising isn't working as it used to. There is hyper-competition and product parity. All products are alike and there are no, or few, bad products. Consumers are media-savvy and saturated.

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So I came to the conclusion that there is a market for *Narrative Management* – a strategic discipline that transcends marketing and that lies at the heart of business success today. It addresses two key questions – what is our story? And: how are we going to tell it. Rather than dealing with the instruments (advertising, PR, etc), Narrative Management deals with the intent and the purpose of a business and ensures organizational and external alignment. Rather than trying to impose integrated communication – what is not integrated at the core cannot be unified at the surface – Narrative Management deals with the story the organization wants to tell and then figures out the most effective ways of delivering the story.

Denning: What obstacles did you face?

Ramzy: The obstacles? First, my own learning curve. This is a new business proposition. So the questions were: how do you position, package and present it? I had always worked at renowned agencies with account managers to deal with clients and business and they had pulled me in when the client needed a strategic planner. Now I had to learn to come out of my ivory tower and take care of business myself.

The second obstacle was the organizational dynamic itself. I learned that organizations suffer the most from the shadow of their strengths and resist the hardest what they need the most. So if the absence of “story” is what a company suffers most from, it probably has management that is focussed on rational analysis rather than conceptual synthesis. And therefore it will most likely reject the new and unfamiliar.

Third, the associations around the word, “storytelling”, were with children playing and having fun, not for working adults, dealing with harsh business reality. I overcome this by positioning Narrativity as a corporate & brand story consultancy and by defining the field as narrative management.

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Denning: What has been the reaction?

Ramzy: The reaction? So far so good! In business now for my 5th year and although it is a steep climb upwards with many difficulties there is progress and a steady flow of business and clients.

SD: You've done some work in using story in different corporate contexts. Could you give me some examples?

Ramzy: Over the past 17 years that I have developed stories that were used:

- to introduce Cafuego a new coffee brand;
- to explain the meaning of the Deer in the Jagermeister logo;
- to change the brand name Smiths into Lay's;
- to define and develop the corporate identity of the ministry of urban planning;
- to power the brand of VSM a homeopathic manufacturer;
- to launch Expatica an internetcompany;
- to explain to 7 Up why a campaign worked as well as it did.

SD: Are some sectors more open to this than others?

Ramzy: I have clients ranging from fast moving consumer goods to financial services; from heavy industrial business to creative professionals. I learned that it is not the sector as much as the mind-set of the individuals that determines if they are interested in narrative

management. More often than not these are reflective individuals who are capable of pausing for a moment, taking stock and imagining a future.

Denning: What resonates with your clients most?

Ramzy: What resonates the most are the models I use to help clients discover, develop and diagnose their story. It elevates the work from the creative and intuitive to the conceptual and strategic; it gives them a handle on the process and a helps them capture and convey it “rationally and seriously” to co-workers. Off course, these models contain some narrative truths and in all honesty I believe it is these truths that connect with people.

Denning: How do you see the role of story evolving in the world of organizations?

Ramzy: The more complex the world of business is becoming, the more business will need to handle this complexity – at the end of the day – story is the most effective, the most efficient, most successful and most impactful way humanity has to deal with complexity of information, decision-making and action. My specific take on things is this: Our identity is the source of our action and, without knowing who we are as people and as a business, we have no real grip on our strategy and actions. We are terribly good at making lists. But identity is more than the sum of our qualities, traits and values. I believe identity is a story. It’s a story we tell about ourselves, to ourselves and to others. To be trusted, the only story we can tell is our own. We can tell this story through words and imagery. After all there is a difference between the man who says he is funny and the man who makes us laugh, and advertising is the proof of that futility. To be believed, the story needs to be told through actions. Therefore, identity is a story you write with your character and tell with your actions.

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**To Hear Ashraf Ramzy come to the Smithsonian Storytelling Weekend
The World's Premier Organizational Storytelling Event**

The Smithsonian storytelling weekend is a remarkably diverse, international event, with speakers hailing from UK, Denmark, Netherlands, Austria and Canada, and from within the US, from Philadelphia, California, Colorado as well as Washington DC. So if you want to get a quick overview of what's happening in organizational storytelling around the world, this is where to get it.

Don't delay - register now!

For the Friday event, go to:

<http://residentassociates.org/otoapr/storytelling.asp>

For the Saturday event, where Ashraf will be speaking, go to:

<http://www.goldenfleececon.org/>

For details of both day's events: go to:

<http://www.stevedenning.com/Smithsonian06-r2.html>

To watch a short video (3 megs) on the event, go to:

<http://www.stevedenning.com/slides/Smithsonian2006.wmv>

To download a brochure (96 kb) that you can share with colleagues and friends, go to:

<http://www.stevedenning.com/slides/Brochure-Smithsonian-06.pdf>