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## Going Beyond Once Upon A Time

*Ellen C. Wells*



Stories have been the vehicles for relating beliefs, histories and life events for societies since before cave dwellers learned to paint on walls. From where the mammoths could be found and how the world was created to Johnny Appleseed spreading his favorite fruit across America, the vessel of information known as the story has been used to communicate what we need to know to make informed decisions in the present and future.

The art of the story—from straight-up facts to the far-out fantastical—can be wielded at retail to help communicate messages to customers. That art can be created in many ways depending on what's to be sold—a product, a service or even a way of life.

### **Becoming Part of the Story**

Origin stories hold interest for lots of people. How the Toll House cookie was created or when and where a family or group settled a town, for instance, is really quite fascinating. Telling the story of how a product or a company began holds that same interest.

“People don’t buy products; people buy stories,” says Jed Darland, creator of Plant Picket, a garden marker crafted from reclaimed wood. The markers themselves have a previous history, having once themselves been part of a wooden barn beam or some other cast-off wood application. As part of his marketing message at trade shows and in written materials Jed tells the story of how he created his first Plant Pickets for his own garden from old redwood patio furniture and explains how current Pickets are made using retooled hand-run machinery.

“When people buy Plant Pickets they become part of the story,” explains Jed, “and just like a good story they can pass [the pickets] along to future generations of gardeners in their family along with the gift of gardening.”

Jed feels that currently there exists a cultural interest in where and how something has developed. “People don’t want to buy just some product,” he says. “They want something they can talk about or relate to, so it’s really important when you are building a brand to take that into account. It’s not just about selling widgets.” Once that story is told, the customer has something to connect to, and they can decide to be a part of it. “For me, telling the story of Plant Picket is an important feature of the brand.”

### **Inform and Inspire**

Stories can also inspire and guide. Bachman’s Garden Centers based in Minneapolis, Minnesota, take a holistic approach to telling the stories of its many divisions, including garden, gift and home décor. For Bachman’s the story is about how they can share beautiful ideas at a real value. “Our key messaging in everything we promote is we will inspire you, guide you, be your trusted resource and you should always expect that you’ll be getting quality products at a value,” says Karen Bachman, advertising and marketing manager for Bachman’s.

In Bachman’s gift department, they most effectively communicate with the customer using visual themes rather than signage. For example, Bachman’s uses five visual themes for the holiday season. The Home for the Holidays theme is visually presented with product lines having a nostalgic homespun look—lots of green woodsiness and rustic sophistication. “We visually tell the story through the theme with set-up and product selection,” explains Karen.

For the garden, the storytelling takes a visual twist by offering plants in containers labeled “Bachman’s Grown” and with Bachman’s-branded garden accompaniments such as soils and fertilizers. A broader aspect of storytelling is done seasonally through Bachman’s media buys. “Our media buys showcase us telling [customers] how to be successful with their gardens,” says Karen. “We give them recipes for everything they will need for the success for that garden season and to be ready for the next season.”

Signage does play a more important role in the garden department, and the storytelling here is strengthened by the addition of Bachman’s signature purple color. No matter if the customer is a casual shopper looking for inspiration in the store’s vignettes or a more experienced gardener looking for further details, the signage Bachman’s displays offers the story customers will need to make the best decisions regarding product selection and usage.

### **History Harkens**

The foundation of Bachman’s storytelling is in its long and proud history in Minneapolis. “A lot of it has to do with the growing aspect for our plants and perishable products,” Karen says. “We will indicate through signage, on our pots and through advertisements that we’ve been locally grown since 1885. That tells the story that we are a longstanding partner in the community as well as a longstanding partner in customers’ gardens.”

In each of Bachman’s many retail locations are photos that showcase the early history of Henry Bachman & Sons as the first and second generations established themselves as horticultural growers and suppliers. They also have photographs of the different modes of transportations over the company’s 130-year history—from horses all the way up to Sprinter vans. What a history—and what a story to tell!

## Telling the WHOLE Story

Stories behind a product or service are sometimes overlooked by a retailer or producer because they are too close to the subject. “Take the story behind Fall Creek Nursery’s BrazelBerries blueberries, for example,” says Suzi McCoy of garden-focused public relations firm Garden Media Group. “We weren’t excited about the name because it wasn’t clear [by the name] what the product was,” says Suzi of her client’s breeding line. “But the Brazelton family was so proud of these plants that took them 10 years to develop that they wanted to put their name on it. When I heard the story I was sold. This is a great story that puts a family’s history behind a plant.”

Oftentimes garden centers end up telling just a chapter or two and not the full story, says Suzi. “Retailers are not looking at the full experience,” explains Suzi. “Look at the full life cycle of a plant or a product and how that is being used throughout the season and not just at that window of opportunity from Easter to Memorial Day.” There’s so much more of the plant or product’s story to tell that can be told through workshops, demonstrations and other sales opportunities. “If you are selling flowering annuals, perennials or shrubs, bring people in for flower arranging classes when these plants are in full bloom,” Suzi suggests. Or do a session on tomato staking or tomato tasting and canning. They’ll come to your store, and although they may not be buying tomatoes they will be buying something else. Suzi suggests setting up workshops, or more casually called “Happy Hours,” where customers can get short bursts of information at different locations in the garden center, each one telling a different product or service story.

“It doesn’t have to be a huge story, just a little something, ‘Here’s the story about why we’re offering this,’” explains Suzi. “People just love stories.”

### Telling the Tale

Suzi McCoy’s tips for stories to share:

- Focus on the favorites. Include an index card near a plant that says Staff Pick that explains why this plant is recommended. The customer may like it for the same reason. It works for wine and book stores, why not garden stores?
- Look at the bigger picture. Costa Farms’ O2 for You/Houseplants With a Purpose campaign had a mission to tell the story Tell the story about how great gardening is, not necessarily how wonderful plants are or that it’s time to clean up your yard.
- Tell other people’s stories. Go around your garden center and ask customers to share their favorite plant story and capture it on video. Loop that video on a screen in the store.
- Pin the point. Create a storyboard and ask customers to bring in photos and explanations of what they did for a specific garden project such as flowers around a mailbox or hiding an AC unit. **GP**