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Tell Me a Story

By Nathan Worrell

Mark Etting pauses in front of the colossal spire of concrete and glass. The top is shrouded in low hanging clouds, and he imagines that at its pinnacle the corporate executives are conspiring with a cadre of deities to find more ways to rule the universe. Workers dutifully pour into the revolving doors like bees returning to their hive.

They are a homogenous blur of white and khaki, and Mark thinks about going back home. Will he become a mindless automaton? Will he start chatting about golf instead of slam poetry? Why did he even quit working for his brother?

Then he sees the lady in the orange dress, a flicker of originality in the monotone sea. Perhaps, if she can survive here, so can a man in a pink shirt, checkered pants, and polka dot bow tie. Mark takes his place in the stream of workers, just as purposeful, but perhaps with slightly different objectives. The first thing he must do is find the lady in orange ...

I, like Mark in the story, recently had a moment of uncertainty, fear, and self doubt. I decided to take a risk and leave a comfortable, satisfying job for something new and unfamiliar. Stories are powerful because of their ability to cut to the heart of our human experience, and provide a way for the imag-

ination to wander through the unknown. In my own journey, the theme of “story” emerged in a couple different contexts and I would challenge that in order for actuaries to be successful, that “story” should be a necessary part of the tool kit.

SHARED STORYLINES

One of the first observations I made at my new job was that while the setting and characters were different, much of the story line was very similar.

My former employer was a financial planning firm, selling annuities and market-linked insurance products. They had a captive agent distribution system, including franchise and corporate sales staff, as well as an external broker driven channel. My new firm sells business through employers, primarily life and disability, but ancillary products as well, which is where I work. My new company also had a captive agent model and broker model. Though a variable annuity and an accident plan are very different creatures, getting each product to a happy ending through the nefarious broker channel requires overcoming similar obstacles.

First, there’s the Beauty Pageant, in which the product must display its unique and special

attributes that make it stand out from the crowd. However, in order to get to the pageant, the product must survive the Margin Squeeze, as each new shiny feature has a cost and the entry fees to the contest are quite high. And winning the pageant isn’t enough, because soon after comes the Battle for Loyalty in which the product has to defend itself against subsequent pageant winners. It’s a fierce journey and not for the faint of heart.

I knew that I could take the lessons from the victories and heartaches of my past employer and immediately apply them in my new job.

WHAT’S THE STORY?

It’s late 2008 and the market is crashing, Lehman is dissolving and other firms are wondering if they are “too big to fail.” The product portfolio was suddenly irrelevant and there was an “all hands on deck” scrum to change focus to a formerly neglected set of products. In the midst of the pricing exercise, the marketing staff set up some time to discuss the new product. I volunteered, and delivered a stellar presentation on all the workings of the product including the math behind the mechanics of fixed interest rates, guarantee periods, bonus rates and surrender charges. At least, I thought it was stellar.

Turns out, the presentation was a complete flop and the marketing staff remained unclear about the workings of the product and it was evident in their materials. I needed a new approach.

Through a collaborative effort, we started to make the story. First we found some familiar reference points—savings accounts, for instance—to establish context. Then we talked about purpose—safety and peace of mind. We used more simple terms than technical ones, and by the end of the process all parties felt very comfortable that we would represent the product well.

I saw this interaction occur in a couple other instances as we developed more intricate and complicated products. We had more discussions about the appropriateness of an analogy than about financial modeling.

STORY SKILLS

In my experience, stories helped me understand a new situation and have been tools to bring products to consumers. Could you imagine if insurance contracts had the “can’t put it down” power of popular novels? Could they contain the teen angst of the Twilight series? Could they be as suspenseful as Stephen King or present a puzzle like Dan Brown? Perhaps

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they could be scandalous, “Fifty Shades of Guarantees”?

Insurance contracts may not be the immediate place for stories, but I want to end with some writing exercises to help take a product from a set of numbers and acronyms to something with color, depth, and intrigue.

1. Find an analogy. What other thing is your product like? In my recent job, I’ve developed parallels to stadium ticket prices and the perils of elderly people falling out of windows.

2. Make your product a character. You can make it a person, or perhaps an alien for a sci-fi twist, or take it to a fantasy realm and give it magical powers. What does this character care about? What motivates it?

Could you imagine if insurance contracts had the “can’t put it down” power of popular novels?

What are its strengths, fears, and weaknesses? Who does it hang out with?

3. Give your product a nemesis. Every great protagonist needs a counterpart. Perhaps it is a competitor’s product, the grim reaper, or a corrupt broker. Whoever or whatever the villain is, its primary purpose is to challenge and create conflict to your product.

4. Write a scene. The most important thing here is that there is conflict. Put your char-

acter up against its nemesis and let the magic unfold. The harder or more impossible the challenge, the better. Use action and/or dialogue (It might be rather fun to hear what your product has to say) to give the scene pace.

I’d love to read your tales. Please send them to me at nworrell@unum.com. ■



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