

di • a • logue (dī-ə-lóg)

ar • tic • u • late (är-'ti-kyə-lāt)

con • ver • sa • tion (kän-ver-'sā-shən)

com • men • tary ('kā-mən-tər-ē)

spin • in (sē-'pin-yən)

dis • cus • sion (dī-'skə-shən)

in • ter • act (in-'tər-əkt)

on • gage (in-'gaj)

# INSIGHTS FROM LOIS KELLY

ex • change (iks-'chānj)

BY J. R. KING

## Listening + Storytelling = *Persuasion*

As someone who has spent her entire professional life helping companies market themselves, Lois Kelly knows all about press releases, positioning statements, talking points, and podcasts. However, she's come to believe that none of these things is worth a damn if at the end of the day no one is saying, "That's interesting, tell me more."

Kelly, who is a partner in communications consulting firm Foghound, has those five words printed on the back of her business card. They serve not only as a tagline, but also as a call for action to companies and individuals who have forgotten the art of telling good stories that make people sit up and take notice.

She calls that art "conversational marketing" which is the topic of her new book, *Beyond Buzz: The Next Generation of Word-of-Mouth Marketing* (AMACOM). In the book, she walks readers through the same process she goes through with clients to help them identify and tell stories that get people talking—and ultimately, get them to take action.

"There are two parts to conversational marketing," she explains. "At least 50 percent of it is becoming a better listener; the other half is talking about ideas, beliefs, and perspectives that are interesting. You need to put ideas on the table to create more opportunities for two-way conversations."

The two are intertwined, she explains, because it is through listening that you can identify the stories that your listener will be most interested in—whether that listener is someone you're selling to (customer), getting approval from (boss), or trying to influence (employee).

"If we listen to our customers, our bosses, our employees, they will tell us what they want and need to know," she says. "I don't think any of us listen enough. That is a shame because it is through listening that interpersonal relationships get stronger. If the other person feels listened to, the relationship is much stronger. It is a huge deal."

Unfortunately, says Kelly, too many people get caught up in talking about what *they* think is important rather than figuring out what's important to their listeners. Falling prey to that mentality results in failures like advertising campaigns stuffed with bloated descriptions of features important only to engineers, or idea pitches that get bogged down in the details of how something will be done instead of focusing on how it will benefit the listener.

Both of those are examples of speaking *at* people instead of speaking *to* them, says Kelly, who is quick to point out that at least 50 percent of any good conversation is listening. What should we be listening for? Ironically, for clues to what our listener wants to hear.

If, for instance, you know from months of interacting with your boss that the one topic that gets him or her excited is reducing production cycle times, then you should use that knowledge to frame any idea that you are going to pitch, Kelly suggests. Don't ramble on about this tool or that technology. Get to the point and talk about how much faster your product can be manufactured. Focusing on what the boss finds important will demonstrate that you have been paying attention. In essence, you will be speaking his or her language.

Of course, there are varying degrees of language proficiency. If you simply tell the boss that your proposal will cut cycle times by 13 percent, you are communicating at the level of someone who has studied the language for a semester or two in college. You might get your point across, but not in a very eloquent or memorable way.

If, however, you can find a compelling way to introduce your idea, or provide a story that demonstrates the benefits specific to your approach, then you are communicating in your boss's native tongue.

Finding those compelling, memorable stories—the ones that get people to say, "That's interesting, tell me more . . ."—is the heart of conversational marketing. Yet how you communicate them is also important. It helps, says Kelly, if you follow these pointers:

- **Challenge assumptions.** You'll get someone's attention by offering counterintuitive advice. For instance, in the example above, what would happen if you began your discussion of cycle-time reduction by saying to the boss, "What if I told you that we could reduce cycle times by 13 percent if we eliminated quality control—without compromising our product in the least?" or if you started off your conversation by saying, "I think quality control is killing our company." With openers like that, don't you think your boss would be dying to hear more? Can't you just hear him repeating the conversation to other managers?
- **Avoid corporatespeak.** People often make the mistake of lapsing into the latest jargon when talking about work—

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synergies, scalability, cross-functionality. The best conversations use plain, ordinary words.

- **Get personal.** Use the first person. “The first person is so much more genuine and believable. You put yourself out there on the line. By saying ‘I,’ it signals that you have bought in to what you are saying, that you find it important and believe in it,” Kelly says.
- **Be passionate.** Researchers can actually predict, based upon tone of voice, the outcome of a conversation. When people are genuine, listeners pick up on a social signal. If you aren’t genuine, people will know it and they aren’t likely to believe anything you say.

While all of those things will help you make your point, in the end, Kelly says in *Beyond Buzz*, the most important point is to have something interesting to say.

“Want the sales reps to make more calls? Give them something interesting to talk about. Want frontline supervisors to be better communicators with employees? Give them something interesting to talk about. Wish the CEO were a more engaging speaker? Give her something interesting to talk about.”

Do those things, she says, and people will be begging to hear more.

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