

Speaker 1: 00:03 Welcome to the same side selling podcast dedicated to modern sales and marketing innovation and leadership. Here's your host, Ian Altman.

Ian Altman: 00:15 Hey, it's Ian Altman. I'm joined this week by Jay Bonansinga. Jay is the New York times bestselling author of the walking dead novels, as well as 20 other fiction and nonfiction books and really one of the most imaginative writers of thrillers according to the Chicago Tribune. We're going to talk about the biggest misconception people have when it comes to storytelling in business. How less is more when it comes to building suspense and a structure for how you can ensure that you attract the interest of your audience regardless of what your subject is, you're going to learn a ton, no suspense necessary with Jay Bonansinga. Jay, welcome to the show, Ian. Thank you. Thank you for that brilliant intro. The finest, the finest in radio right there could not have written a better intro. Well, and I don't know that she didn't write that one, so the audience will never know it. Jay, can you start by sharing something surprising about you that people may not know? You know, I'm glad you asked

Jay Bonansinga: 01:23 me that because, um, I, uh, often am amazed by this misconception people have about people such as myself who work in the field of suspense and horror and scaring you, you know, on the page and on the screen. And I've been doing it for a long time. And people, the misconception is that we do this, uh, are, uh, immune to being scared. And, um, this is a fascinating part of storytelling that I've, you know, discovered over the years. Nothing could be further from the truth. I am scared even to this day, I have a hard time, you know, sleeping in a, in a, in a room alone at night with the closet door slightly ajar and uh, you know, and I'm not too crazy about what could be under that bed.

Ian Altman: 02:13 Uh, you know why Jay? Because cause you've got such an amazing imagination that you've thought of ways that you could be attacked and most of us would never even conceive up. Well, yeah, well some might consider it a condition, but, uh, I think, I think that it's fascinating though, cause I think that people, people get that. It's just, it's just like as someone who speaks and writes about sales, people say, Oh, well you probably never make a mistake. I said, no, half of my material comes from mistakes.

Jay Bonansinga: 02:44 Right? And you're really, you're reading my mail right now. And it's not because we've rehearsed this. I swear to God we have not rehearsed this. But you, you really hitting on the crux of storytelling, which is connecting with people, connecting on a human level. So you're what you consider maybe your shortcomings or, or you know, your human nature that you, you to, you know, you, you, perfection is something you're always going forward and you figure, well, my human nature, my personality, my quirks, even some might say my shortcomings can never enter into this. This is your

secret weapon because you will connect with others. You use your shortcomings. I use my fear to scare others. That's how I figured out how to do it on the page. I know the mechanics of fear. Yeah.

Ian Altman: 03:34 Well, and, and, and so, and, and you're somebody who is, I mean, in terms of your imagination writing, what I want to tap into is there's a lot of buzz in the business world about storytelling and people have all sorts of convoluted mechanisms. What's the greatest misconception that people have about telling their story in a business context?

Jay Bonansinga: 03:55 Well, that's a great quote. I think that it's a great question. I think there are many, but if I had to pick one of the most powerful misconceptions that leads people astray, it would be the more data you give to your listener or your viewer, the more they will walk away with. And that, alas, I wish that were true, but it's not, it's not the amount of data that you give to your, to your potential client or your customer or your audience. The people that are, that want to understand your brand. It's not, it's not the amount of information, it's the emotion that you communicate. It's connecting with that person. I think one of the most brilliant marketing campaigns is just do it. Yeah. It's because I, part of my, my stick, uh, my bailiwick is that in storytelling less is more. Yup. But if you can hit on the minimal amount of words to deliver the most powerful message, you really have something. And I need go no further than just pointing out two of the major shoe companies, Reebok and Nike being, I challenge you right now. Tell me Reebok's slogan.

Ian Altman: 05:31 Oh, Reebok slogan, it's a symbol and Reebok sloping in is we wish we were Nike. That's, I think that's their slogan.

Jay Bonansinga: 05:39 Like I, I mean, I think you could push it all the way to, you know, Nike is [inaudible] is a brand, you know, and Reebok is a tennis shoe, you know, nothing wrong with it, but it's not a brand, you know, because because of that brilliant Nike, just do it saying so much. I mean, I, I, I often think of that Hemingway story. Um, Ernest Hemingway, you know, probably one of our greatest storytellers, maybe whoever lived, but many people don't realize he also was one of our greatest drinkers.

Ian Altman: 06:15 Okay. And maybe that's why it was a great story.

Jay Bonansinga: 06:18 Exactly. I'm here to tell you that helps. But, uh, you know, he would get in his cups and he would say to his cronies, you know, down at some dive bar in Havana or Keywest, he'd say, I can tell a story that has drama. It has tragedy, it has character development.

Jay Bonansinga: 06:43 Uh, it even has a twist ending. And I can do it all in two sentences. And only six words. Put your money on the table Gent. really and that, and you know, they'd bet him that he couldn't do it. And then he would proceed to tell this story. And only six words. Yep. Yeah. For sale. Baby shoes never used. Wow. Okay. Wow. Wow. And I use, I use that to illustrate the most powerful story is told with the fewest words. It's it, it's told with the fewest data coming into your brain, because your brain is, is, and, and, and consumers are the perfect example of this. This is why it works so well in business. Your brain is processing emotion before it processes data. Raw data to your brain is like empty calories. It's, it's just not, it's not getting processed the same way you need to study it.

Jay Bonansinga: 07:49 And if you're going to take a quiz, it's, you know, you needed to memorize data, but your brain will remember emotion forever. There's something about emotion and, and we can deliver all these sales messages and in business venues we can deliver these, these messages with emotion. And I, I, I, when I, whenever I do a talk, I, I give, you know, simple tools of the trade that I use still to this day. Sure. And telling, you know, uh, you know, and writing a novel and writing a screenplay and it's the same thing that, that a sales rep could use.

Ian Altman: 08:27 Yeah. And, and of course, I mean, you've written books that, that had been on the New York times bestseller list and sold a gazillion copies of, and it's stuff that people tune in and can't miss, can't miss a movie, can't miss an episode. It's like everything they've got, they're just kept, you know, they're captivated right here, what's next thing and get all the message out of it. It's, it's fascinating to me and it's something that I learned a long time ago, which is, you know, I've given hundreds and hundreds of talks, probably well over a thousand talks now and I'll see somebody years later and they won't remember any data, but they'll remember stories almost verbatim. Isn't that amazing? Amazing. And to your point of less is more, there's a signature story that I tell him, my talks that when I first delivered, it was about 12 and a half minutes long, right?

Ian Altman: 09:23 And, and over time I've worked with professionals and now that story is just over four minutes long and I can't, I cannot tell you what's missing, right. Between 12 minutes and four because now when I tell it, I think to myself, there's nothing else it needs. Did you say this idea? And guess what? In those four minutes, the audience is on the edge of their seat. Right? He can't wait to hear what, what happens next and they laugh at the exact time they're supposed to and they gasp when they're supposed to and they smile when they're supposed to. Right, right, right. It's so much, it's so much more compelling in four minutes than with 12. I talked to people who will share with me their presentation they're working on and they say, so, so what do you think of this chart? What do you

think this graph?

Ian Altman: 10:12 And I'm, and I'm always wondering, what are you trying to convey? Like is you're trying to demonstrate your, your abilities and your skill in creating a chart. No one will remember then I would keep it in there. Right. Otherwise there's no reason to do it. So, so what are, what are some of the buildings,

Jay Bonansinga: 10:29 not to interrupt, but I think, I think it was Mark Twain who once said in a letter, uh, you know, I'm sorry, uh, I didn't write you a shorter letter, but I didn't have enough time. Exactly. Yeah, yeah. That's, that's exactly, but that's the whole measure twice. Exactly. Yeah.

Ian Altman: 10:49 I mean it's just, you know, the, the idea I often tell people, I said, look, come with what you're going to say and then figure out how to delete half the words they go and then, and then what? And then read it.

Ian Altman: 10:58 And then figure out how to cut half of those words and then you're probably, you're getting there or getting into something. So, so what are some, what are some of the building blocks because you know, obviously there's, there's people listening who are thinking to themselves, okay, well that's great, but you know, gee, I'm talking to my shareholders or I'm talking to my client. It's not like, you know, I can put on a hockey mask and pick up a chainsaw as part of my presentation. Right. You know, so, so it's not like I can create that sort of suspense or drama. So what are some of the building blocks that business people can learn to capture people's attention? Cause I think really what we're getting to is how do we capture someone's attention and imagination. Because if we do that effectively, then they'll hear what we have to say. There's a, I'm a fellow speaker friend of mine, Ron Tite is based out of Toronto. And a while back I had Ron on the podcast and Ron said something that, that has stuck me, which is

Ian Altman: 11:54 when we use humor, when we use drama, we'll use any of these, these tools. The most important part is that we've captured people's attention to hear what comes next. It's not even so much the moment of the suspense or the drama or the comedy, it's that we woke up their brain and the audience now thinks to themselves, man, I want to pay attention cause I want to hear what comes next. Right. I don't know if you agree with that or disagree with that.

Jay Bonansinga: 12:24 I you're again, you're reading my mail. You're, you're, you're, you're hitting, you're hitting the, the, the bullsyes I uh, you know, I, I I w I teach screenwriting and creative writing, uh, at a couple of really great institutions. Northwestern university, DePaul university, university of Cincinnati

and um, aye. So I'm gonna, I'm gonna this is, this is sort of a story I'm going to use to build up to a responding what you just said, which you're spot on.

Jay Bonansinga: 12:54 Many times my students will pitch story ideas to me. Yup. And it is a sales pitch. It's very similar to, they're selling me on the story that they want to write for 12 weeks in the class, you know, so it's early in each, each semester they're pitching me the, the story ideas. And they're really good at the what if, what if there was a, a little Amish boy and, and he visited, you know, he had to, he had to visit relatives in Philly, you know, he lived in the country, never even seen a big city and he arrives in Philly. And he's, he's, he goes to the bathroom and he's in a stall and, and there's a murder and he's the only witness to the murder. What do you think? And, and I always say, wow, that's an amazing, what if that's a fantastic, what if you may recognize the story that I just pitched as a rip off of a real movie that exists called witness with Harrison Ford and Kelly McGillis.

Jay Bonansinga: 14:01 But, um, but it's lacking the one thing that I give to salespeople and people in a business venue, which is what I call the, and then, yeah. And this jibes perfectly with what you just said. I tell them, I tell the student it's a fantastic idea. It's a great, what if you're lacking one thing and it's what I call the and then. Then, okay, it's a twist. It's a a turn that you didn't see coming. And in that movie I used to illustrate it later in the, in the opening act, maybe 20 minutes into the film, which is usually the time this occurs, there's a twist that you didn't see coming and that is the little boy identifies the murderer to Harrison Ford who's the detective assigned to the case. And Ford realizes, Oh no, it's a cop. Yeah, now we are really in trouble.

Ian Altman: 15:01 Yeah. So it creates an additional layer and and a additional layer of conflict.

Jay Bonansinga: 15:06 Yeah. It launches you on what in my field is called the second act. But in business it's the solution. It's the answer. It's the product. It's the program. It's the thing that maybe they didn't see coming. So you know, you in business, you build these stories that you have sort of in your pocket. You have your origin story of your company. You have your um, you know, uh, your, your, uh, story of getting yourself into trouble and working through it. And, and customers love to hear these stories, especially if they're told, uh, well and, and in a lean, you know, a laconic fashion with as few words as possible cause they don't have the time to hear, uh, you know, a novel here. They want to hear the bare bones story but they want it to be emotional and dramatic. So you have this and then you have this, you know, this thing that that is basically the crux of why you're telling the origin story, why you're telling everybody has an origin story.

Jay Bonansinga: 16:12 We all have origin stories, how we got into the business that we're in. You know, and that's how you sort of, that's how you really practice this technique of this two-part storytelling technique. The what if, and the, and then I wrote an article about this that I hand out during my talks for writer magazine. And in the article I just explained, I needed something really simple to understand great storytelling and how to couch everything in a great narrative. So, you know, you can't just come out of the gate and go, have we got a program for you or have I got a product for you?

Ian Altman: 16:51 You knew, you know, and you know what Jay, one of the, one of the, one of the things that, that I often teach is this notion that no one cares about the solution unless they're bought into the problem that needs to be solved. So if you start by talking about your product or service, no one knows why it's relevant. And so one of the principles that I often share with people is look to the extent that you can share a third party story of someone like them. So for example, if you were selling, if you were selling it services to law firms, right? You might, you might, you might say, well, so other law firms, what they told us is, man, they had this problem where their systems weren't reliable, their people couldn't access things remotely. And so then they thought, Oh, you know what? We're going to use Google drive, we're going to use this, we're going to use that. And that was going to be their solution. And lo and behold, they realized that there were security holes in that and an expose their clients. So now we're building suspense so that they may, they may have been thinking to themselves, well, I'll just do it this way. Oh, I can't really do it that way. And so for them, they needed us to come up with a different solution. How relevant would that situation be to what you're facing right now?

Jay Bonansinga: 18:03 You're, you're, you're telling a story. You're, you're, and also you're, you're listening the, some of these things are cliches in business, you know, you need to be a good listener to sell. You need to. But I think there are cliches because they're true. The great storytellers have great empathy. Yeah. They know what this guy on the other side of the desk feels because we're all human. You know, the whole idea behind the, what if, and then was invented thousands of years ago by Aristotle because Aristotle believed, and he was speaking mostly about drama on stage, but, but it has, you know, been adopted as a story structure. And, and it, and an Aristotle believed that humans absorb stories the way they live their lives. Yeah. Our, our, what if is our childhood? It's, it's, we're born into this world, you know, what now and the, and then is that turning point everybody has when they're 20, when they're 24 when they're, you know, 19 did they go to war or they go to go into, they go into the work world and that's, that's their turning point. That's their end then. Yeah. And you know, I, I really believe those two

little words. And then what's the secret to the universe? They're almost like the atomic formula to life on your planet. And then that means exactly what you said a few minutes ago. At the outset of our talk you said, you know, people are waiting to see what happens.

Ian Altman: 19:43 Yeah, that's it. So Jay, let me, let me ask you this, cause I guarantee that we've got people listening saying, okay, so I'm in this business context and I'm, I'm selling enterprise software to big companies. I'm selling professional services. I like, well, we don't have this big exciting story. Like, you know, GM, I'm selling accounting services, I'm selling, you know, complex software to helps, helps run an organization. What are the building blocks, how can they think about this idea of building story in a way that they can say, okay here are the first couple of steps I can take to start turning this boring stuff into a story that someone would actually want to hear.

Jay Bonansinga: 20:30 Well I mean I don't want to sound like a, you know, stay in a slob, ski method acting coach, but but you just did it by saying gosh, you know, you've had probably a half a dozen of of of my ill come through, you know, across your desk and try to sell you a software package or whatever it is, a program. You're, you just did it. Ian, when you were describing the question. That's that's your what if, yeah, I know when I might have something that you at first might not think is a game changer. You know, this stuff can be boring as watching paint dry, talking about it. You know, and you, you, you start that way, you start making a connection with that person. So they're going to go, yeah, okay, what do you got for me then? Yep. And you're building them toward this and then, which you know, you, that's the secret. I mean, I can't give this to a sales rep or a business person, I can't say, and this is your end then that has to be organically created by product or by what you're selling. And incidentally, and, and I, you know, I tell this to my students and it applies to business people probably even more intensely. You have to believe in your, and then you have to believe in your product.

Ian Altman: 21:55 Well, and, and the, and the way Jay, that, that I haven't looked at this cause hearing what you're saying, it's, you're first starting with a level of empathy, which says, look, I'm sure you've heard it. Just building on what you said, it's this notion of stir. First I start with MV. Look, I'm sure you've talked to a bunch of people in this space and then, and then so now at first I've demonstrated empathy that says, look, I understand where you're at. And then it's usually people come to us because they're trying to solve this sort of problem, right? And the way they've tried to solve it in the past is a, B, C, or D, none of which really worked for them. Right. You know, how similar is that for you? And now what we're doing is we're giving them the what, F and we're giving them optional ways of the end then that didn't turn out so well.

Ian Altman: 22:40 And then we're giving them, look now for our clients who have had great success, here's there and then, right? Is that something that similar to what you're looking for? And by the way, if it's not, we're probably not the right fit, which, which is something that that I teach a principle called disarming that says, look, if what we're good at delivering isn't what you want, then we're probably not the right people. Right. Which right. The inverse of that is. Well, but if, I guess, but if I do want what they're saying, then I guess I am a good fit. And they kind of convinced themselves rather than whether than trying to convince them.

Jay Bonansinga: 23:15 Right. I, I, you know, I think people always allow perfection to, maybe Obama said this once, I don't remember, but you know, they allow perfection to be the enemy of success because, you know, imperfection to me is the linkage to success because the person on the other side of the desk is going to go, maybe even unconsciously, they're going to say to themselves, Oh, okay, this is a new attack. You know, he's, he or she is, right. I'm sure I've seen a half a dozen of these people and I'm really bored by it. And you D you did what Hitchcock. This is the thing that I bring, Oh, to the party when I'm speaking to business groups, because there's a lot of storytelling gurus out there and they're all brilliant. And I, and I, what I,

Ian Altman: 24:05 well, by the way, they're not all brilliant, but many are nothing is all

Jay Bonansinga: 24:13 sturgeon. Theodore sturgeon, a great writer, once said 10% of anything, be it chocolate pudding, you know, uh, doctors, movies, books, only 10% is really great. 90% is mediocre. Yeah. And I think that Sturgeon's law is, applies to a lot of things. But with that said, uh, I think there is a universal that everybody can practice and that is that, that, you know, uh, build a buildup of empathy, which Hitchcock, who was one of my mentors from a distance, I loved him as a kid. I loved his movies and I loved everything about Hitchcock, spoke to me. And Hitchcock used to say, um, you know, uh, there's two different kinds of storytelling. Shock and suspense. Shock is easy. Shock is where you have two people having tea on a lovely day and an outdoor cafe and all of a sudden, boom, a bomb blows them up. That's shock. It's easy. It's not what I do. I practice suspense, which is a much finer emotion. Any, any. Then he proceeds to say, instead of doing the boom, which I do is I show the same people setting it the same table and I show the audience the bomb underneath the table set to go off in three minutes. Then I go back to the people and I show them talking about the weather and now the audience is saying,

Ian Altman: 26:08 tell, talk about the weather. Well and the funny part of that is a um, uh, a friend of mine, Michael port who wrote a book called steal the show talking to, it's all about

professional speaking. Michael has this concept that, and he may have it attributed to someone else, but I heard it from him and from his wife Amy port, which is in a great story if you think of you're trying to deliver something that is, that totals for a great story is that you as the writer or the speaker provide to and the audience provides the other two that totals four. So if, if, if you do the math for the audience and you provide all four parts, it's not as fulfilling to the audience as if you build, you give them the pieces, they put it together, right. And now they're there. And I think it's the same principle in a business context, which is if you give people the information and you help, you give them the tools so they can solve the puzzle themselves and the puzzle piece happens to be the offer that you have, then you've just won. Because now the client says, well, I'm so smart, I just figured out that I need with this person who's trying to sell.

Jay Bonansinga: 27:29 Right, exactly. Exactly. That's that. You know what, I'm going to steal that. That's brilliant. I, I, you know, I teach people how to, I teach people how to tell very simple stories with, with two sentences. Because I, I, I want to continually drive home the point of two parts and you get their attention with the what, F and then you, you, you hit it home, you close with the N then and I, I teach them that in my field. You know, making something scary really is less is more like for instance, you know, I can tell you a scary story in two sentences. I woke up this morning and there was a picture of myself sleeping on my phone.

Ian Altman: 28:18 Yeah.

Jay Bonansinga: 28:19 The next sentence is I live, I live alone. And so, but the reason I bring that up is because the way that you hook somebody, the way that you, you scare them, the way that you make an impact and you can send extend this into business very easily is you get them hooked into it. So they're doing a lot of the work. Their brain is [inaudible]

Ian Altman: 28:47 margining. Yeah. So, so that is in the example you just gave, all of a sudden it's like your brain saying, well, what could have happened? Someone else goes house. How do they get out of and get into his phone? Right? Who is it? Is there somebody, are they still in the house and like you're going through all these things and they're in your brain that you didn't have to say, but these audience is contributing it to the story in the second sort of thing. I think in business is, you know, it's, it's, for example, someone can walk into a company and say, well, if you don't have these capabilities, here are all the things that go wrong in your business. And the, and the client goes, yeah, maybe, but what if, what if instead you said to them, so we have clients who told us in the past that they didn't have these capabilities in their business. What do you think of the consequences of that to their business? And the

other person says, well, it's probably a, B, D, E, and F. these are all the consequences. Okay, so that's for their business. How do you think those apply to your business? And all of a sudden they conclude, wait, we have those same problems. Well, all they're doing is they're taking, they're there. They're adding their 2 cents to the story that makes it that much more believable. Pass my course with flying colors. I give you an a plus. That was my goal, Jay.

Ian Altman: 30:05 That was my goal. It's awesome. Hey, J J this is this fascinating topic. What's the best way for people to connect with you and learn more about what you're doing? Well my, I, I'm very fortunate to be all over the internet and much of it is because the walking dead is now a household word. So you know, you can find out where I'm appearing, what I'm doing, what my, what my latest books are all@justmyname.com J [inaudible] dot com perfect portal to everything. So personally we will, we'll include that in the show notes cause I'm sure if people want to know, we're going to want to reach out and uh, and be captivated and learn how to captivate their audience as well. So Jay, thanks so much for sharing your wisdom. It's a lot of fun. You too. Thank you. Jay shared so much great information. Let me give you a quick 32nd recap of the key information you can use and apply to your business.

Ian Altman: 30:57 And if you have a chance to bring Jane to speak to your business man, it's just a fascinating discussion of how to turn storytelling into value for your clients. Here's that quick recap. First, less is more. The idea that more data means they'll walk away with more information isn't necessarily relevant when it comes to crafting your story. Don't just end it the what? F make sure that you include the, and then, and of course all great stories start with empathy and suspense involves creating a turn in a direction that you didn't see coming. Remember, this show gets direction from you, the listener. This is a topic I should cover or fascinating guest I've got to have on the program. Just drop me a note to ian@ianaltman.com if you haven't yet taken a chance to post a review or share this with other people, by all means, please do so. Have an amazing week. Add value and grow revenue in a way everybody can embrace, especially your customer.