

## Winning is about telling a good story well

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Published: March 2 2011 21:43 | Last updated: March 2 2011 21:43



### Tell to win

#### Connect, Persuade and Triumph with the Hidden Power of Story

By Peter Guber

*Crown Business*, \$26

Without Peter Guber, Bill Clinton might never have been president. Or at least that is how Guber tells it. It was 1992, and Clinton had lost the New Hampshire primary, his campaign torpedoed by accusations of infidelity and draft dodging.

The morning after his defeat, Clinton called Guber, one of his leading supporters in Hollywood, to ask him to raise money. "Have you ever seen the picture *High Noon*?" asked Clinton. Guber, a successful film producer, knew the story by heart. A brave sheriff, abandoned by his townsfolk, waits to take on a fearsome killer set to arrive on the noontime train. "Peter," Clinton said, "this is *High Noon*."

Guber writes in this wonderful book, which is part business text, part entertainment memoir, that up to that moment, he had felt as deflated as the rest of Clinton's supporters. But the *High Noon* reference re-energised him and he began to hit the phones, telling friends just what Clinton had told him. By 4pm, he had raised enough to keep Clinton's campaign going. He called Clinton's chief of staff and said "it's *High Noon* and you've got your money. Now take on the bad guys and win."

*Tell to Win* is packed with stories such as this one, from businesspeople, politicians, religious leaders and self-help gurus, all friends or acquaintances of Guber. They have been gathered to make the point that whatever you are trying to do in life, it is vital to be able to tell a good story.

Whether you are Nelson Mandela trying to persuade the world of the viability of a post-apartheid South Africa, or Guber, trying to sell the mayor of Las Vegas on an idea for a new baseball franchise, stories are vital. Michael Milken, the financier, tells Guber that when he was in his prime at the bank Drexel Burnham Lambert, "I used to team up the data guys with good storytellers. That's how we got many things done."

For several years, Guber has been running a course at UCLA called Navigating a Narrative World, and much of the material in his book comes from the many famous visitors to his classroom. Guber makes a compelling case in this book for the importance of telling good stories in business.

He approaches his subject from various angles. He starts by defining a story as a three-step process. The first is getting your listeners' attention with an unexpected challenge or question. The next is describing the struggle to overcome that challenge or answer the question in emotional terms. The final step is to "galvanise your listeners' response with an eye-opening resolution that calls them to action".

Your story must make your listener believe that they too can be a hero, whether it is Gary Cooper in *High Noon* or the mother in the laundry detergent ads who cleans her kids' sports kit just in time for the big game.

Easy as it sounds, understanding the mechanics of story has taken Guber a lifetime. Among his Hollywood hits was *Rain Man*, in which Dustin Hoffman plays an autistic savant and Tom Cruise his cocky, opportunistic brother.

For years, Guber says, he thought of the Hoffman character as the hero of the story, a man suffering from autism who overcame his challenges. It was Barry Levinson, the film's director, who made him see that the real hero was played by Cruise, because he had to make hard decisions and feel real emotional change.

The success of the film, Guber writes, came down to audiences seeing Cruise's character evolve in order to give his brother a better life, forcing them to ask: what if someone close to me could no longer look after themselves? How would that change me? What journey would I have to go through to meet this challenge? The story galvanised viewers to imagine themselves in this heroic role.



In his many business dealings, Guber has told stories, and been told them, and his book is crammed with entertaining examples.

In 1992, when he was chief executive of Sony Pictures, he was invited to accompany the head of the Sony Corporation, Norio Ohga, to Berlin, where Sony was planning its new European headquarters. As the Sony jet landed at Tempelhof Airport, Ohga exclaimed: "This is a great airport – Tempelhof. Hitler built this airport in the thirties! It is famous." Guber's worst fears were confirmed when they reached the open field where Ohga would build the Sony complex. He asked: how come so much prime land is available? "Back in 1945, this was a famous place," Ohga explained. "Down underneath here was Hitler's bunker."

When Guber expressed his shock, Ohga replied: "Peter, you work for Japanese. We were allies with Germany in the war." The two men had very different stories running in their minds about the suitability of building on such a historically resonant site.

If all Guber does through writing this book is hasten the deaths of a few PowerPoint presentations and their replacement by some proper stories, he will have served a thoroughly heroic cause.

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