Once upon a time… When we think of storytelling, we think of fairy tales, fables, and parables. Stories are as old as humanity itself. They surround us in books, movies, commercials…and in compelling presentations. There’s a reason that Budweiser spends millions to tell a one-minute story that centers around puppies and ponies—not facts and figures. Stories are memorable and compelling. And, stories create connection.

Shelley Row, P.E., PTOE, CSP (F)

Storytelling: The Newest, Age-Old Method to Communicate Your Transportation Project
Every day as transportation professionals, we plan, design, build, and operate transportation systems that impact real lives in real ways. Stories of those real lives are all around us, yet we often miss the opportunity afforded to us through the power of stories to humanize transportation and sell our programs. Stories can be used in a proposal, client briefing, conference session, public hearing, legislative/council presentation, or to sell the boss on your project. Instead, we lead with facts and figures that come off as boring (best case) or clueless (worst case). Stories are the antidote.

To skillfully use stories, the first step—the only one we have room to discuss here—is to learn the three characteristics of effective stories. Stories:
- have a structure,
- make a point, and
- they leverage emotion.

Take, for example, this story that was told at a reverse-pitch training session for the Texas Innovation Alliance. The team pitched their fictional multimodal app project to City staff.

Meet Robert. Robert lives in Austin and commutes to work by bike. Robert knows all the routes between his house and office. He knows exactly when to leave home to be at work on time. He does it every day. Until one day when something goes wrong. There’s an unexpected work zone, a utility repair or special event closure. When that happens, it takes Robert 30 minutes and seven apps to find a new route.

It doesn’t have to be this way. We have the partners and the skills to gather and integrate data to create a seamless, accessible app to support bikers, walkers, and others. But we can’t do it without you, City of Austin. If you agree, we will partner with you so that Robert and the other 11,000 Roberts who bike to work have peace of mind knowing that they get to work on time every day.

Let’s dissect this story.

**Story Structure**
Stories have a defined structure. Once you know the structure, you’ll see it in everything from Cinderella, Talladega Nights, that Budweiser commercial, and The Grinch (which you may have recently seen!). The story structure can be seen in Figure 1. Stories start with today’s current state (every day Robert biked to work). Then a problem happens (until one day Robert encounters a work zone and it takes seven apps and 30 minutes to find a new route). The journey ensues, which includes struggles or actions to address the problem. (It doesn’t have to be this way. We can gather and integrate data). The turning point is the “aha moment” where we come to a new realization or a big decision (We can’t do it without you, City of Austin). Next are the implementation actions (gathering and integrating data). This results in a new, better state (there’s a new multimodal app that improves travel for bikers).

**Stories Make a Point**
To make your point in an effective and memorable way, let the story carry the message.

Let’s say you are under pressure from the City Council to complete a complex project quickly, but you are concerned about the implications of racing through the work. You want to encourage the Council to be patient, and help them see why it’s best to wait. Consider using this story:

Recently, I was at a conference in a large hotel. The meeting rooms were on the second floor and I was headed to the escalator to go downstairs to Starbucks. In front of me was a man and small boy. The boy, about 3 years old, in jeans, with curly brown hair, skipped along in front of his dad. As they approached the escalator, the dad grabbed his hand and playfully swung him onto the top step of the escalator. The boy squealed with glee! As they rode down, the boy leaned forward—a lot—in anticipation of leaping off the bottom of the escalator. I held my breath, envisioning the sharp teeth of the escalator against soft, baby skin. I neededn’t have worried. The dad reached down, held his hand and said, “Not yet. Wait for it.” At the bottom of the escalator, the dad once again swung him safely off and he scampered away. City Council, we understand the desire to finish this project quickly, but our analysis indicates that an accelerated approach could compromise the safety of residents and visitors. We respectfully ask that you “wait for it” and trust that we are doing our best to deliver promptly and safely.

**Stories Use Emotion**
Could you see the little boy in your mind? Maybe you swung your child or maybe a parent swung you on an escalator. There’s something in the story that connects to almost anyone. It captures your attention and your heart—and it communicates a relevant point. The more vivid and relatable your stories, the more memorable. After all, the brain is designed to process stories and visual images.
Rather than tell a compelling story that people relate to, we often focus on data. We say, “This project will increase throughput by 15 percent” or “Once we retime the signals in the corridor, delay will be reduced by 10 percent.” Can you hear (and feel) the difference? The numbers come across as cold and impersonal. Plus, most people can’t relate to “throughput” or “delay.” You miss the opportunity to connect.

Don’t misunderstand. You want statistics for credibility, but statistics aren’t the story. Statistics support the story. Numbers are more likely to stick in your mind when they are woven into the story. Test yourself. Remember Robert in Austin? How long and how many apps did it take him to find a new route? Did you remember 30 minutes and seven apps? The likelihood of retention goes up with the use of stories.

Think about one of your projects. What is the everyday, real-life problem your project solves for people? What difference does the solution make in their life? Rather than use traffic engineering terms, use human being terms. What does increased throughput mean to their daily life? Review the story structure. How is their life in the future different from today? Listen to the stories people tell you about why the results of your project matter to them. Maybe they arrive at their daughter’s soccer game in time to see her big play. That matters to people. Use those stories to communicate your project, connect with people, and be memorable.

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