

Fiducient Advisors, Nonprofit Investment Stewards Podcast

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How Storytelling Can Benefit Your Endowment — With Park Howell

[00:00:00] Welcome to Non-profit Investment Stewards with Bob DiMeo and Devon Francis from Fiducient Advisors. Bob and Devon are passionate about helping nonprofit organizations prosper. Whether you oversee endowment, foundation or retirement plan investments, this podcast exists to help stewards improve performance, reduce costs and discover strategies that enable your charitable organization to prosper and advance its mission.

[00:00:26] Now onto the show. Hello and welcome back to the Nonprofit Investment Stewards podcast. I'm Bob DiMeo. Great as always to be joined by co-host Devon Francis. I'm going to define today's episode as, let's call it nicely off track from our typical show. We have a terrific guest who has become a good friend over the years.

[00:00:49] And he's about to share with all you nonprofit leaders why the story you tell in describing things like investment performance, raising [00:01:00] money, and so much more, why that story truly matters. But before that, Devon, really good to be with you. How's your day going? It's great, Bob, thanks. I'm so excited to be here. We have Park Howell with us today on the show. Park is known as the world's most industrious storyteller, and he's the founder of his own firm called Business of Story.

[00:01:22] He has helped so many international brands, among them, Coca-Cola, American Express, the U.S. Air Force, as well as nonprofits like Goodwill, craft and tell compelling stories that influence. Among other things, Park is also an author. He's a professor at Arizona State University and he also hosts his very own popular podcast.

[00:01:43] So Park, welcome to the show. We are so thrilled to have you here. Oh Devon, thank you so much for having me. And Bob, I couldn't think of a better set up than being nicely off track because I think a lot of people might describe me that way. That was purely [00:02:00] complementary. I think you know that, Park, and so good to have you on the show.

[00:02:03] You and I have known each other for a number of years now, and it's great to have you here. And today, you're known for helping so many organizations as one of the best and most sincere, I think we'll get into that a little bit later, but one of the most sincere storytellers. It would be great to have you share a bit about your career and how you really came to be an expert storyteller?

[00:02:26] Well, I started when I got into the advertising, branding, marketing world over 35 years ago now, that I had always leaned towards story intuitively. But I wasn't intentional about it and I didn't have a good advertising career working for other agencies. And I started my own agency called Park&Co in Phoenix, Arizona in 1995.

[00:02:48] And I ran that for 20 years before I pivoted away to focus solely on consulting, teaching, coaching, and speaking on the power of story and [00:03:00] sustainable purpose driven businesses. And Bob, one of the main reasons why I turned away from traditional and digital advertising and marketing into leadership and brand storytelling, it was because in about 2004, halfway through my tenure running Park&Co, I realized that the old way of advertising, marketing, communication no longer worked primarily because of the internet.

[00:03:25] Where brands used to only influence the mass media, the masses have become the media. And they're more prevalent today than ever. They're willing to talk about your story, share your story, warts and all. And I just realized that we as business leaders and non-profit leaders needed to find a better way to what I call hack through the noise and hook the hearts of our audiences.

[00:03:52] And I was surprised to find that the primal power of storytelling, that ability to [00:04:00] tell a compelling story in three acts, set up, problem, resolution, in under a minute, is the deciding tool to be able to connect and convert our audiences. And you know what? It's been that way since the very first recorded story of Gilgamesh 4,000 years ago, it's just simply the way our brain is wired to make meaning out of the madness of being human beings.

[00:04:26] And so, that's where I have moved into become. A client of mine once said you are the most industrious storyteller I know. So that's why I swiped that. I thought that was a pretty good position for me. Cause I liked to put stories to work for nonprofits and for-profits for any and all purpose-driven brands.

[00:04:45] That's great, Park. So, there are probably some listeners right now who are thinking, hey, now I tune into the investment stewards podcast for investment related topics. Why does story matter to me? So maybe you can share why story is important [00:05:00] overall and why story matters a lot, maybe even more to charitable organizations.

[00:05:05] Well, the first thing I would ask your listeners to do is just to Google search the ROI of storytelling, because there are any number of different studies that can demonstrate why they call storytelling a soft skill, meaning you can't really measure its outcome. You absolutely can. And there have been projects out there that have demonstrated ROI on storytelling anywhere from 30% to literally 3000%, by applying a story in the emotional context.

[00:05:39] It can create around the purchase of a product, of a service, or the investment or funding of a nonprofit program. The other thing I would say about storytelling, and since this is an investment program, why you should invest in it, it was just a year and a half ago that LinkedIn did a major study of what leaders and businesses were looking [00:06:00] for in their talent and their new recruits, especially those coming out of college.

[00:06:04] And for the first time in forever, soft skills led the list. And the five primary soft skills were creativity, persuasion, collaboration, adaptability, and time management skills. Now, when you look at any of those skills, you can't find those in a spreadsheet. You find them through the culture created in the stories that you tell and how well you can communicate in the context of a story to be able to connect with that person sitting across from you, whether it's your boss, it's the hiring professionals, HR, it's your colleague, or it's someone who reports to you.

[00:06:45] Stories are what make us uniquely human. And that's why the ROI can be spectacular when you really focus on sharing your mission and vision in the world through the power of a story. [00:07:00] It's, uh, it's just a way of being more effective as I hear you work through that. And we all have to communicate. We all have to influence and make our points. And I think you're simply, uh, really putting a point on, on, hey, this is how you can be more effective in getting any message across.

[00:07:17] And to that point, Park, Devon and I, and our colleagues, we're regularly relying on all sorts of stats and numbers and such in advising our endowment foundation clients. And then in turn, their investment committees and finance teams at these various charitable organizations, they need to communicate things like investment performance and such to their stakeholders.

[00:07:41] Tell us how and why numbers can be overly relied upon, and maybe the downside to that. Yeah, absolutely. The first question I always ask when asked that question is, what is the first syllable of numbers? Numb.

[00:08:01] [00:08:00] And I posed that question because our limbic system, our subconscious brain, where really all of our processing goes on, is not built around numbers. It never has been. It's basically the same system that our ancestors use to navigate and survive the Savannah. It's the same system we use today to navigate and survive this massive amount of communication coming in at us.

[00:08:27] And, you know, in your line of work in particular, numbers, financial data, stats, facts, and it just was not built to make sense of it unless we put it in the context of a story. Then we make it easy for our brain to digest and understand the information.

[00:08:46] So that's not to say, if you don't start, you lead off and you're sharing a bunch of numbers that, that brilliant person sitting across from you will burn the calories and try to make sense of it and put it into the context that makes meaning for them. [00:09:00] But most people won't because our brains are actually lazy and our brains don't want to have to work that hard.

[00:09:06] So unless we put it in the context of a story, quite often, these numbers just ricochet off of our head. For instance, I'll give you an example of it, the best, the clearest way, I think of it anyways, is look at the weather report. Your newspaper or your iPhone or whatever. It's a really good example of turning data into drama.

[00:09:24] So data does, and numbers does one of three things, and think of a weather report. It either reports on an event that happened in the past, yesterday, what the weather was. It monitors an event that is currently happening. So, you can look at your temperature right now and tell you exactly what's going on.

[00:09:42] Those numbers are going to tell you that. Or those numbers attempt to predict an event that may happen tomorrow. But our brain literally only cares about the event because events can kill us. Data can't. Numbers can't. And this was never more [00:10:00] underscored to me than when I went through a four-day screenwriting course with the legendary screenwriting coach, Robert McKee, over in LA with 300 want to be screenwriters.

[00:10:10] I was in for the marketing world and he made that point over and over again. And making movies and writing is, don't get caught up in numbers because our brains can't process it as well, unless we put them in the context of a story and events that demonstrates the real world impact those numbers are having on an individual.

[00:10:38] That makes perfect sense, Park, and appreciate you sharing that. Let's talk about storytelling regarding endowment portfolios, charitable organizations, whatever sort of pool they're overseeing. Let's say there's bad news, tough quarter regarding investment results, or maybe one of the investment strategies isn't working out and there needs to be communication to stakeholders.

[00:11:00] [00:10:59] The investment committee might need to communicate with the nonprofit board or what have you. What can you tell us in terms of storytelling and narrative framing, I suppose, with respect to this circumstance? And, well, the thing is about stories is they are a vehicle to deliver the truth and in so doing, it creates the trust.

[00:11:21] Now sometimes that truth is in the form of bad news. But it's still truthful in the telling of it. I, in the coaching on something like this, as I say, all right, well, we just got to swallow the pill and go in and tell them exactly what's happening. Maybe there's a metaphor or analogy that we can use in the delivery of that information.

[00:11:42] But no, it's going to land kind of hard on those investors or those board members sitting across from you. But the thing about it is if you skirt the truth, if you skirt the issue, if you try to hide behind the numbers, it will eventually catch up with you because our [00:12:00] homosapien brain just has this wonderful BS detector in it.

[00:12:04] And if we are not showing up with truthful stories, you feel it. You know it in your gut. So, I'm, I'm a huge proponent of you go in and you, you bring in the bad news and you share it in the stories, but you also share, but here's what tomorrow could look like. Or here's what we're doing to make the necessary changes.

[00:12:26] There's just no way around it. Stories deliver a truth that ultimately creates the trust and in all of our lives, that's the one thing we've got going forward is trust. That really drives home the point about sincerity that I made earlier, and Park just highlighted the ABT, which is really throughout his materials and his books and so on, the And-But-Therefore. And I almost thought of an ABT there, Park, if you are delivering, let's say the investment committee or the director of finance or whatnot has to, it [00:13:00] could be we researched this, it has a place in the portfolio, so on and so forth.

[00:13:05] But the circumstances of the market in March 2020, whatever it may be, has this not performing in line, therefore, they're still what they used to be. We're going to stay behind it. Or we have new information. We need to make a change, but the ABT seems to apply incredibly well there as well.

[00:13:20] Oh, without a doubt, and I'm really glad you brought that up. Again, for your listeners, the ABT is a structure of and, but, and therefore, as Bob just expertly demonstrated. It is a story structure. It's not necessarily a story in that something happened and something to an individual and whatever, but it uses this structure of setup using the and, which is always a statement of agreement.

[00:13:46] So, Bob, as you mentioned there, we invested in this strategy last year and it held all kinds of promises. So, there's a statement of agreement. Everyone's nodding, you're right. That's exactly what we had, what we were going for. [00:14:00] But the problem is market dynamics of 2020 changed. And we did not necessarily anticipate the impact.

[00:14:10] Therefore, we are going to make this change. And the good news is we believe that we can recover by da, da, da. So, you've used this setup, problem, resolution that our cause-and-effect brain absolutely loves and you can do it in under 15 seconds. And it's what we teach to head up every presentation is start with an ABT because you are hooking into that limbic primal system of your buyer's brain, your prospects' brain, your board members' brain, where all their real buying decisions are being made by the way.

[00:14:44] And then you're sharing of here's what we're going to do about it. So, you've got a cause-and-effect problem solution dynamic and it is super powerful. Park, would you, would you give an example or maybe a couple of examples of where the ABT is used almost throughout history [00:15:00] and some pretty famous ways? Oh yeah.

[00:15:02] So I learned about it from Harvard PhD, evolutionary biologist, Dr. Randy Olson who became a USC film grad, filmmaker, produced three documentaries on climate change, global warming, but has written five books, teaching scientists how to use story structures to communicate their big ideas and the and, but, and therefore is at the center of his work.

[00:15:23] And I learned about it from him about eight years ago and he and I have become fast friends around it. He teaches it in the science world. I teach it in the business world. He and I, in fact, Bob, we're coming out with a new book by the time this airs, it'll be out by the 1st of August and it's called The Narrative Gym for Business.

[00:15:39] And it is all about the and, but, and therefore, and how you can craft it and put it to work. But when I first saw it from a branding standpoint, I thought this is brilliant because my job as a brand has always been about taking a complex idea around a brand and simplify it to its core, unique, interesting principles to [00:16:00] get audiences.

[00:16:01] To get customers to buy in as easily as possible. The ABT I found is like the single most powerful narrative framework. I wished I had learned it in the third grade, but when I looked at it, I thought, could it, is this really a thing? I mean, has it really been around the course of time? And I started researching it. Nursery rhymes, virtually every nursery rhyme is and, but, and therefore.

[00:16:23] Such as Little Miss Muffet sat on a tuffet eating her curds and whey, but along came a spider who sat down beside her, therefore scared Miss Muffet away. You've got set up. She's eating her curds and whey, but we have a complication, along came a spider who sat down beside her, and then we have the consequences, therefore it frightened her away.

[00:16:46] Then I found it. I started looking at legendary iconic leadership addresses. The Gettysburg address is the perfect and, but, and therefore. Lincoln essentially said, [00:17:00] we are a great mighty nation, but now we're embroiled in a miserable civil war. Therefore, we are here to bring this war to a conclusion to protect our nation.

[00:17:12] You know, that Gettysburg address was given in two minutes and it's one of the most iconic addresses ever. You look around, you see even in pop music. Carly Rae Jepsen's Call Me Maybe has in the chorus, a perfect and, but, and therefore. And she has 1.3 billion views on YouTube. Now that's pretty amazing numbers.

[00:17:37] Is it because she has an ABT in that catchy little chorus? May well be. Did they think about putting an ABT in there now? They're good, solid, intuitive songwriters, storytellers. And what we like to teach people is you are also as a homosapien an intuitive storyteller. Storytelling is unique to us human beings, but I want you to move into becoming [00:18:00] an intentional storyteller so that you can use it in your workday in and day out to increase the ROI of your organization, of your numbers, of your people, of your culture and the ABT is the best place to start.

[00:18:13] That's great. Park. Thanks. So, you know, there's the, the anecdote about the plumber's wrench and, and getting really too into the details that don't necessarily feel relevant to people. So,

do you have any advice for those smart, caring practitioners when they find themselves being overly reliant on numbers or, you know, maybe even long lists of data right in the middle of the meeting?

[00:18:35] Does anyone really care about the plumber's wrench? And, and how might you advise those individuals? Yeah. This one sentiment, and then I'll explain it. When you're telling your story, it is not about what you make, but what you make happen and that people you serve. So, it's not about what you make in the [00:19:00] financial world.

[00:19:00] Of course you are in the business of making really great numbers and returns and using your wisdom to be able to do that on behalf of your clients, your customers, and so forth. And that's important, of course. But what the brain really cares about or that prospect or that colleague sitting across from you is, how do you translate that data into drama?

[00:19:23] What is the actual real-world impact you are having on, it can be a nonprofit organization, on a family, on a business. You know, what, what is the impact of those numbers? That's the story that you want to lead with. And then the one other thing that I'll underscore here is the power of storytelling is always in that singular narrative.

[00:19:48] So when you were telling, maybe you're, you're telling about a success story you had with a particular organization, I don't want you to talk about the organization. I want you to talk about an [00:20:00] individual in that organization and the impact it made on them and their career. And then by proxy, the entire organization.

[00:20:08] Here's the thing, when we don't talk about an individual, we start adding two people to that story or three people as the center of the story or a team or a department or an organization, we lose our audiences because our brain wants to know what happened to a single individual that I can relate to and live vicariously through so that I can learn what I would do in case it ever happens to me.

[00:20:34] But I want you to start with that story about that individual and the impact you made through what you make and what you make, you know, in this context would be, fabulous financial planning and strategy and so forth. That's what you make, but what do you actually make happen in people's lives?

[00:20:51] Yeah, I think you're spot on with that. And, you know, I think back to, um, I've been involved for a number of years with an organization that makes grants and [00:21:00] it's so much more impactful to hear from some of the individuals who have been impacted by the grant. So, let's say, an organization gets this money and then we hear at the annual meeting from a specific person that said, these funds allowed me to pursue my college degree.

[00:21:20] And I'm a single mother with three children and I wouldn't have been able to do it otherwise. And that means so much more than just reading the statistics. We helped 150 women and gave out this amount of money. So having those personal stories, I think you're right in tandem with the numbers is, is so much more impact.

[00:21:39] One of the things that I wanted to talk about is ESG investing. It's a hot topic. We refer to it on almost every single episode of this podcast. So, do you have any thoughts on how nonprofits can or should weave mission-aligned investing or ESG investing into their communication and into their story?

[00:22:00] [00:21:59] Absolutely. I have the distinct pleasure of working as a communications consultant for Walgreens and their corporate social responsibility program. And this is always one of the top topics we've talked about this. What it ultimately comes down to is ESG investing is hugely important. And I think it's going to get even more important, not just to help save our planet and our globe, but because of buyers and consumers and people that will give to your fund and so forth, this is becoming a top priority for them.

[00:22:35] So if you are indeed working in this area, you absolutely are missing out if you are not incorporating it in your storytelling. The first thing I would say is it has to be authentic to you. So, wherever you are investing, there's gotta be a core belief or value that that investment reflects in your leadership in your organization and how you help motivate people.

[00:22:59] That's [00:23:00] number one. You got to start there because if you're investing in something that just seems to be off brand, again, that BS detector in our brains will pick up on that and you will lose some trust in the process. Then number two, when you are aligned with your ESG investing, with your beliefs and values, you just want to simply connect those same beliefs and values to your audiences.

[00:23:18] And you do that through stories. You don't do it by talking about how much you're investing, and that's, that can be as some part of the story down the road, but where you're investing, why this is important to you, the impact of that investment.

[00:23:34] And it can be a super powerful part of your overall storytelling portfolio, if you will. Do not shy away from it. And if it happens to be you're investing in something that might have a little bit more activism related to it, and maybe some board members might be a little bit worried about investing in that or talking too much about it, that usually means you're on the right track.

[00:23:56] And those are the stories of real [00:24:00] impact that people want to hear out there. Park, many of our listeners are involved on the investing side, but a number of them also are involved in fundraising or development. And I remember listening to one of your episodes. It had to be in the last few months where I heard you discuss a real success story with Goodwill.

[00:24:18] Would you share that experience? Oh, absolutely. And thanks for asking. It's all still in my book, Brand Bewitchery. I was going back through it again today to revisit the numbers because it was so powerful. So, this happened in 2018 September. It was a more, no checked that, it was 2019 September, because it was pre-COVID and Goodwill of Central and Northern Arizona was having their annual fundraiser, which was a breakfast.

[00:24:44] And they have a lot of success. They have a lot of the same people show up. They probably fill the room with 200, 250 of the local leaders here in Phoenix, Arizona. I've been to several of these breakfasts because Goodwill has been a client of ours for many, many years. And [00:25:00] they asked me, what I come in and what I give the ask, what I, you know, they were, they designed the whole program around stories and Devon, to your point, they shared a lot of these wonderful little individual stories of the people they've helped through their workforce development program.

[00:25:15] And so then I came up at the very end and I had an ask and I started with the little story of me when I was about 10 years, 11 years old. I was digging a fence post up in Seattle, Washington, a

home where I grew up, but it was Wednesday out. It was raining and I was whining to myself. Like I worked all day at school.

[00:25:38] Why do I have to be out here digging these fence posts? And my dad who was a depression era kid and a civil engineer, ran a large construction company up there called Constructors Pampco. He comes wheeling in the driveway and he gets out with his typical wave and big smile. He says, hi boys, how you doing?

[00:25:56] And I looked at him and I whined at him about [00:26:00] having to be doing this labor, manual labor work, in the middle of the rainy Wednesday. And he just said one thing to me. And he said, a guy might think about picking up that shovel or someone else will, and he turned around and walked off. And that had always been embedded from me from that point forward about the power of hard work and what work means to you.

[00:26:21] And I shared that story and I could look out in the crowd and people were kind of looking at each other, like where in the world is he going with this? And I made the analogy of when they write that check for Goodwill, that it goes to helping put people to work. It puts shovels in people's hands, metaphorically, and how important it is.

[00:26:39] So I asked him if you don't pick up that shovel or in the form of that hand right there, maybe no one else will. And anyway, that combined with the marvelous storytelling that Goodwill had done leading up to that led to, they were trying to get a goal of \$200,000 in donations that morning. And we actually [00:27:00] reached \$345,000 that morning.

[00:27:05] And they had a number of people come to them afterwards and said, that was like the most powerful fundraiser I've been to in many, many years. And again, it wasn't because of my silly little story, although it had a lot of impact, it was because of how well each of those leaders got up and the videos they shared telling about the actual impact Goodwill makes in the world.

[00:27:25] And therefore, the impact that their check signing will make in the world on giving people the sole raising ability that a job brings with it. That's the power of story, Park. Thank you for sharing that. And, and whether someone is calling it storytelling or influence, right? All of us at some point or another are attempting to communicate our point and as effective a way as possible.

[00:27:51] And you've shared so many wonderful insights. What else would you add or emphasize for nonprofit leaders who might be involved in overseeing [00:28:00] investments or raising money for their organization? Any other best practices or things you'd like to impart? Yeah. I would like to go back to that comment that Devon made about telling that individual story.

[00:28:11] And so what I want your leadership to take away from is it's important to tell that story but be careful that you become too generalized in the telling of it. What I want you to do is take us to a moment in time in that person's story where everything changed. In my case, I shared that moment in time when my dad said a guy might want to pick up that shovel or someone else will.

[00:28:34] That was a moment that changed my life. I want you to tell stories about people and take us to that moment. And there's five primal elements to a short story to make that big impact, just do it in this order. Timestamp.

[00:28:48] When did it happen? Location stamp, where did it happen? Character. Who's your central character and individual? Introduce them that the audience can relate to. Then an action and a surprise outcome from that [00:29:00] action. That's that moment that everything changed, which leads to the aha moment, which is your business point. So, you're going to replace all your opinions and assertions with a true story about the impact you're having in the world.

[00:29:15] And you're going to take us to a moment that makes your business point for you. And then, Bob, real quick, the last resource I'd like to share here is there was a fabulous article written back in 2009. November 30th, 2009 and Outside magazine of all places. And it was written by Nicholas Kristoff from the New York Times.

[00:29:35] And he talks, the title is advice for saving the world. And he shares from his point of view as a writer, the absolute critical importance of the singular narrative focused on the singular individual if you want to have an impact in saving the world through your non-profit organization. One of the best resources I've ever read on this subject and a great [00:30:00] takeaway for your listeners.

[00:30:01] We'll be sure to add that to the show notes. So, Park, when you are not telling stories, what are some things that you like to do outside of work and outside of your volunteer efforts? Yeah, well, we, my wife, Michelle, and I had just built a home up in Northern Arizona. So, we're about two hours north of Phoenix.

[00:30:20] And we're up in the mountains. I live on a beautiful little lake here. We love kayaking and fishing. We have a beautiful five-mile hike up to a place called Crystal Point that I take my golden doodle out, Hazel. She and I there, Michelle comes along too, and we run up there and back and, and then I like to play golf.

[00:30:38] So, and when the snow hits, I'm also a big-time skier. I grew up in the Pacific Northwest and our babysitter was Steven's Pass. And our parents used to take us up there when we were five years old, put us on a bunny slope so that they could go and do their thing for the day. So, I really loved skiing. That's excellent.

[00:30:57] I am a fellow skier and a fellow golden [00:31:00] doodle owner. So, we've got lots in common. And, you know, as a, uh, I've mentioned many times on the blog, how much I love reading and I'm a huge fan of literature. So, the talking about story is, is really near and dear to my heart. So, thank you so much for joining us today.

[00:31:16] You've provided so much valuable perspective as to how non-profit organizations can get their story across. So that's, it's just been so phenomenal and we appreciate your time. If listeners want to learn more or to access resources or to reach out to you, where should they do that? Yeah. Thank you, Devon.

[00:31:35] And thank you, Bob, for having me here. Businessofstory.com. And as Bob mentioned, I've got a weekly podcast. I've been doing it for six years, and it's just all about storytelling and every aspect of business and leadership. And I've also got a very short 18-minute course on how to apply the ABT.

[00:31:55] It's called The ABT's of Selling, and we are all in the business [00:32:00] of selling one way, shape or form. And you can find that at businessofstory.thinkific.com. Park, we'll include all that

on the show notes. Thank you so very much. It's been great having you on show. Well, thank you. And I'll leave you with this.

[00:32:15] As I sign off on all of my shows that the most potent story you'll ever tell is the story you tell yourself. So, make it a great one. Thanks so much for having me here. Thank you, Park. Thanks so much. And thanks to our listeners. Park provided exceptional insights. I'm happy to add a resource that dovetails his advice.

[00:32:33] We have a short blog post at fiducient.com titled how to make your investment committee more effective. We'll include that in the show notes as well. So, to all you good stewards, thanks for investing time to help your nonprofits prosper. We'll connect with you soon on the next episode. Thank you for listening to the Nonprofit Investment Stewards podcast.

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