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Storytelling: the conduit to good health and prosperity in rural Australia

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Steve Jobs once said 'The most powerful person in the world is The Storyteller' yet most communities and organisations have work to do if they are to step into this power.

Thousands of their stories are untold.

Rural and regional organisations are well placed to influence the way community members perceive themselves and how the broader population thinks about life and work outside of a capital city.

Research from The Grattan Institute suggests a top-down approach, relying only on public policy to promote growth outside capital centres isn't working. CEO John Daley suggests 'If you're in a regional area, you may be unhappy that the dominant culture of the country is increasingly less like your town'¹.

Done well and with purpose, these unscripted, untold stories will protect and grow our culture locally while educating and influencing decisions about relocating to live and work in our regional communities.

However, stories will only be a successful mechanism for community development and organisational change if the storytellers place value in their stories, connect to a common story, and have specific skills which allow them to tell their stories well, for the right people, through the right platforms.

Background

Why storytelling?

Neuroscience shows decisions are driven by emotions not logic. Good stories effect our brain chemistry and help establish trust, empathy and find a shared understanding with others.

Most people expect that decisions are based on logic, however neuroscience shows the reverse is true. Through his research, neuroscientist Antonio Damasio and his colleagues found people who had damaged the part of their brain responsible for emotions were unable to make even simple day to day decisions, despite logically understanding what they should choose². His ongoing research shows our choices are driven by emotions first and subsequently justified with logic, particularly when our brains are clouded with choice³. Similarly, Neuroeconomist Paul Zak's research

investigates the impact storytelling has on the chemistry of the human brain. He found our brains release both oxytocin and cortisol when listening to a story, which helps to get our attention and increases both empathy and trust⁴. Zak say ‘Stories are an effective way to transmit important information and values from one individual or community to the next. Stories that are personal and emotionally compelling engage more of the brain, and thus are better remembered, than simply stating a set of facts.’⁵ Further to this, Neuroscientists Uri Hasson found when people listen to a story they feel the same emotions as the characters in the story. Hasson’s research suggests storytelling is an effective way to a create common ground through a shared understanding.⁶

Why now?

Rural and regional voices are missing from both the national and local mass media.

The most recent Australian Communications and Media Authority Local Content Report⁷ makes note of the continued rationalisation of traditional media in regional Australia, causing regional newspapers and TV broadcasters to stop their service or reduce their scope. It’s expected the continued delocalisation will make it harder for rural and regional stories to find their way to both local and national mass media platforms. As a result, metropolitan audiences, will only see rural and regional stories popping up in their news feeds if they have been shared by their personal networks, or if a story is pitched in such a way that it can’t be ignored by media organisations. In absence of this, it’s hard to find reliable information about life outside the capital cities and as such, city audiences have little choice but to rely on outdated stereotypes to form their opinions about life in regional and rural Australia. Further to this, the reduction in scope of services at a local level, means journalists aren’t supported with the time or resources they need to properly reflect their communities. As noted by Ella Saltmarsh, an anthropologist and specialist in systems change, luckily, we no longer rely on the era of passive mass broadcasts but instead have the ‘means to be storytellers as well as story listeners’⁸.

Why employees?

People trust information from their peers far more than information from the media, organisations or governments.

Anecdotally consumers are more media savvy than ever and often the prettier the picture, the more they assume it’s fake. Authenticity is widely accepted as the new currency of trusted information. Edleman’s 2019 Trust Barometer reported a huge change in consumer trust. President and CEO Richard Edelman says people are becoming more sceptical of the information posted on social media platforms which has shifted ‘their trust to the relationships within their control, most notably their employers.’⁹ Trust in media, business and government is at just 50%⁹. The Internet has given consumers the ability to become their own researchers, with nearly half reading online reviews before they buy¹⁰. It fits that consumers trust each other before brands and trust their personal and trusted networks above all else¹¹. There is a significant opportunity for regional and rural organisations to harness this trust via their employees personal networks and better tell the story of living and working in regional and rural Australia.

The common problems

There are four main reasons why most organisations and individuals shy away from storytelling as a mechanism for driving change. In part, it’s because of the way we perceive ourselves, and also because of the way we perceive our skills as storytellers.

We aren’t sure what people want to know about life and work in our communities.

We can be our own worst enemy in perpetuating stereotypes about living and working outside our big cities. A quick google image search of 'living in rural Australia' shows you pictures of wide-open spaces, dirt roads and windmills, often posted by the very organisations that are working to attract workers to build rural populations and economies. This type of campaign-driven content tends to focus on the things that sets regional Australia apart (such as clean air, beautiful scenery and space) rather than what connects us (everyday logistics and how we spend our time). It's almost impossible to find engaging information about day-to-day life, what people enjoy doing or the variety of work that is available outside the capital cities. As the custodians of regional stories, we often don't have the time, skill or inclination to think about what a city audience values or wants to know, so instead we focus on what we **think** they will value.

People think the types of jobs they want aren't available outside of big cities.

By sharing the stories that highlight difference rather than commonality, we perpetuate the misplaced belief that regional communities don't have similar career opportunities as capital cities do. Plugging a capital city salary into a recruitment website search won't reflect the diversity of jobs available regional Australia. While high-priced short-term contracts and rural incentives schemes may help a few float to the top, they haven't been adequate or successful in attracting and retaining the right people to regional communities¹². In the absence of large corporates, the comparable pay packets that are available in regional Australia can be hard to 'search' for online. This lack of accurate community storytelling allows the outdated narrative of backwards people, isolation, hardship, sacrifice and tradition to continue. It's unlikely job seekers from big cities would think workplaces in that sort of community could provide the salary and support (such as professional growth and permanent flexibility¹³) that they've come to expect and value.

Traditional communications policies inadvertently restrict authentic storytelling.

Some of our best advocates, our employees, have limited capacity to share their organisational stories online, as it's commonly seen as a source for reputational risk¹⁴. This makes it harder to capture meaningful and authentic stories about working life in regional areas. Employees are both unable and possibly unwilling to share these perspectives. The absence of these stories online perpetuates their absence, as they we're conditioned to think our jobs aren't interesting or appropriate to talk about. Instead we only see campaign-driven organisational stories from CEOs, mayors or other leaders and get frustrated when we can't get community buy-in, effective systems change or awareness about issues. Small business owners are often the exception to this rule.

We're starting to wonder if our community or organisation is still as great as we thought.

While we're sure that most Australians see our way of life as an important part of our country's character, would they really want to live here? As with all minorities, when your own sense of identity is absent from main stream media and popular culture, it's no wonder you start to believe that it's not valued by others. The only time you're likely to see your community in the paper or on the news is if a politician is talking about a fire, drought or funding announcement. Perhaps the jobs are harder, the work more complicated, the isolation tiring, or do we just let them be? It's in trying to understand why others aren't interested, that our own pride of place is impacted. What if they're right?

The opportunity

Stories are an effective way to transmit important information and values from one individual or community to the next. Stories that are personal and emotionally compelling engage more of the brain, and thus are better remembered, than simply stating a set of facts.⁵ Paul Zak

A system of storytelling will support systems change.

Give your people the tools to know what to share, so they can share what they know.

Implementing a system of community storytelling can be the catalyst to sustainable systems change within rural and regional organisations and the communities they operate within.

However, its unlikely to happen organically, and rather needs a conscious effort.

Research widely supports the role storytelling plays in successful community development¹⁵. Ella Saltmarsh suggests **community renewal through storytelling happens best where leaders and the community both play their role**⁸. She says, 'As movement-builders, our work is to get the right balance between structure and openness, creating stories that both build communities and encourage others to actively author their own, giving them a greater stake in the issue'⁸.

Communities who use shared leadership models, genuine community engagement and empower their people to lead and re-author narratives are more likely to pull through hard times⁸. In their research, Mike Nutt and Gilson Schwartz investigated the ways in which disenfranchised communities, experiencing economic pain, are successfully taking a bottom-up approach to economic development by leveraging their personal experiences and knowledge unique to them¹⁴.

The Stories Worth Telling project from Georgetown University's Centre for Social Impact Communication found there are two components to a good storytelling culture: a mindset and appreciation for stories, and capacity¹⁵.

A system for effective storytelling has proved a valuable asset for community-wide health promotion initiative 'Active Launceston', in Launceston, Tasmania. Supported by a Masters¹⁶ Thesis, the founder and project Manager Lucy Byrne also notes the significance of a working storytelling system to demonstrates the societal impact and its role in maintaining longevity, funding, and outcomes¹⁷.

Active Launceston has developed a strong community profile, an excellent reputation, and a highly-recognisable brand and community identity. The projects events, programs, website, organisational structure, partnerships and levels of community engagement have gained accolades at a state, national and international level.¹⁷

Conclusion

Community led storytelling is a crucial component to successful systems change. Organisations and communities who invest and enable a wide spread storytelling system that empowers, equips and then embeds the process into the day to day of our community members and employees will not only survive but thrive during tough and polarising times⁸. Further still, the implementation of storytelling systems provides a vast resource to draw upon and drive down the collective bill for time and resources spent on advocacy and funding requests.

Recommendation

There is an urgency for a diversity of community organisations, local governments and businesses to invest in storytelling systems for the well-being of their communities, their organisations and to safeguard their way of life.

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Presenter

Penny Terry loves a good yarn because she knows good stories are the quickest and most effective way to make people care about who you are, what you do and why it's important. She's spent more than a decade as an ABC Radio presenter, broadcasting upwards of 20,000 stories from diverse perspectives, from politicians to prisoners. She now helps people and organisations tell their stories, create their own willing tribe of advocates and use these assets to create community change. As a speaker, facilitator, mentor and MC, Penny champions storytelling, drawing from the thousands of stories she's collected through her career so far. She demonstrates how good storytelling skills are critical along the path to influence and can change conversations from outrage to empathy and inspire collaboration over competition. Penny shows audiences how to take the fear out of contributing to public conversations as she unpacks authenticity, the science of opinions and the power of emotion and vulnerability. Penny is a Telstra Business Woman of the Year national finalist and is never far from a microphone, whether it's in the studio, on the stage or with a guitar in hand!