

## Storytelling with Simmons

Guest was Annette Simmons

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## Transcription of Podcast

**Joe Dager:** Welcome everyone! This is Joe Dager the host of the Business901 podcast. With me today is Annette Simmons. Her book, *The Story Factor*, is a classic in the truest sense of the word and is substantiated by 800-CEO-READ when they named it one of The 100 Best Business Books of All Time. She also wrote *Whoever Tells the Best Story Wins*, *A Safe Place for Dangerous Truth*, and *Territorial Games*. Annette has inspired audiences to find and tell powerful stories that build strong leadership, change cultural values, and prompt behavior change. Annette I would like to welcome you and this is one of the most difficult interviews I have ever had to prepare for.

**Annette Simmons:** Why do you call it difficult?

**Joe:** It seems like I would like to talk to you for days versus 30 minutes.

**Annette:** I would like to talk to you for more time. I am really interested in how you've been using storytelling.

**Joe:** Really the fact is everyone has always told to tell stories. In the sales and marketing area that seems to be all you need to tell a story and people listen and they only remember stories. But it doesn't seem that a lot of people really ever get any training in stories or how to construct stories.

**Annette:** There's a reason for that. It's kind of the same thing that happens when a writer wants to learn how to be a fiction writer. A lot of what people say about storytelling is technically accurate. Like stories have a beginning, middle, and end. Stories have tension and conflict. But I tell you that and does that help you make yourself a better storyteller?

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**Joe:** No, not at all.

**Annette:** No. So there's things that are accurate, but the way I think about it is you could get a PhD in Faulkner and how he wrote wonderful stories, but it doesn't make you Faulkner.

**Joe:** So what's the secret? Is there a secret?

**Annette:** Let me say first that I think that the surging popularity of storytelling is because our society had to have some kind of language to talk about what facts and data can't talk about. I think initially they talk about emotional intelligence, but that got too technical. Leadership was all about traits, but you know, you're supposed to be flexible or consistent, which one is it? So with storytelling, it's about turning your attention to the subjective rather than the objective. When I teach storytelling what I teach initially doesn't have anything to do with about how to tell stories but it has everything to do with how to see stories when they're right in front of you because when you start to analyze something with rational thinking stories disappear.

Stories operate on a different logic than rational logic. For one thing stories are nonlinear so that a tiny, tiny detail can make a huge difference. It's the same as if you say one wrong thing, you could screw up for the next decade. Understanding that dynamic, understanding that ambiguity, and paradox is inherent in stories, because they are inherent in the human experience. Actually user experience design has done some great work. I'm just writing about that right now and helping us understand storytelling. It doesn't have to do with plot and characters – more about details that reveal the meaning. Meaning is highly variable, which is another thing about storytelling, another way to say ambiguity.

Once you begin to understand that storytelling is going to conflict directly with a couple of assumptions and rational logic – for

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instance one plus one equals two, like one detail is as good as another, well it's not – and the idea that you have to be clear and focused. Well storytelling is not clear and focused because you're pulling out details that could be interpreted in several different ways. But the only way you can get someone to participate, i.e. called listening to a story, is to leave room for them to make their interpretations. Storytelling at heart is about helping other people come to their own conclusions because they value theirs more than they value yours.

**Joe:** *You made a great point there, and it reminds me of the fact that when I first took an art class, it was one of the best classes I ever took because it taught me how to see.*

**Annette:** Yes.

**Joe:** *And what you're saying is that for me to be able to tell stories, that's a good analogy there, right? That connection.*

**Annette:** It's perfect. I take painting myself, and my painting teacher continues to tell me that this is not a photograph. What she means is that you've got to drop a lot of the details when you're painting, unless you're a realist – and she says, "Why not just take a picture?" But you have to pull out elements that suggest a shape or a form in order for it to be art.

**Joe:** *With storytelling what I'm trying to do is to be able to tell a story and for let's say even a salesperson to tell a story it's not necessarily just a case study of a thing. The part that we're really looking at is some of that conflict, some of that middle and things that you are taught in storytelling, you see that happening in front of you to be able to repeat that. So all that stuff I'm supposed to learn about stories is truly there but it's more the interpretation of it as I'm watching it unfold in front of me.*

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**Annette:** And another way for me to say that is that it's personal, not professional. So that's what we want storytelling to be is personal. When a lot of people write a case study, they're obsessed with getting all the facts in and they don't include the names of the people, they don't include the dilemmas that they had or the failures that came before success. And it is that information that makes it a story.

**Joe:** *Well one of things that you've been applying storytelling to that I thought was very interesting was healthcare, and leadership, patient behavior and cultural change. Can you kind of break those three a part a little bit and just tell me a little bit about that?*

**Annette:** Again I'll go back to storytelling is a way for us to talk about these things. In medicine, they love for all changes to be backed up by evidence. The catchphrase is evidence-based tools. The problem is that storytelling includes ambiguity; it's personal which makes it very situation specific. And so they've lost the capacity to address these very, very important things that have to do with people's feelings, not the facts. So for instance if you wanted to lose weight, if things were based on logic, then you'd only need to read one diet book. We got something else going on entirely here. And in order to address the emotions, for instance patient education, you don't hand somebody a brochure about diabetes and expect it to change their behavior. Well they do but they're starting to realize it doesn't work. Now that the American healthcare act requires that results, patient health be included in remuneration, people are now beginning to think, "Okay patient education has got to improve, what can we use?" Storytelling.

When nurses can tell a story, that's personal to them it feels personal to the patient. So you can deliver some sort of generic instructions about behavior modification but if you tell a story it has emotional content and it starts to sink in. Even if this person

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is completely different from you. And that's one of the things people think, "Well that's irrelevant." No, it's not because it's personal. If it's personal to you it will feel personal to them and when you make that connection they begin to open up and listen to what you have to say. With patient satisfaction, the same thing applies, and you can use it backwards and forwards.

For instance UX, user design, in software does the same thing by gathering user stories instead of surveys which they live and die by. If a hospital will begin to gather stories specifically about why they got low scores and communicating to the patient why the procedure is late – this is a big deal – they may find out that it has more to do with the way the office is setup. User design has known this for a long time. If you can have eye contact with somebody then maybe you understand a little bit more about why things are running late. I'm not sure what it is because it's different in different places. Now I'm using storytelling to train nurses to understand that every patient has their own special story that can only be interpreted through their kind of world view story. If you have a patient that thinks the world is a dangerous place, you talk to that patient differently than the patient who thinks everybody is wonderful and is happy to be there just because somebody said good morning. These understandings really aren't possible without storytelling. It's the language for something that we've been ignoring for too long.

**Joe:** *You need to directly relate to that person and have that conversation with that person based on their outlook. So you're talking about storytelling really as a way to create conversation, it's just not one-sided.*

**Annette:** It's diagnostic; it's therapeutic, it's a form of treatment – yeah, all of those things. One of the most important experiences of my life was teaching leadership in the 90's, and I began to realize that even the biggest jerk in the world is that

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way because something happened to them and so I began to realize that everybody has a story. We sometimes got the executives that needed fixing. In our leadership training, it included a self-awareness workshop and I found out one guy when he was seven his five year old brother drowned and his father blamed him for it – a seven year old. And this guy was a total jerk. Ever since I can look at total jerks and because I know that one story I have a lot more compassion for them because I figure they've got a story too. So storytelling is pervasive in our ability to understand human beings. And the sense of feeling important. Ambiguity does not mean we can't understand. We simply have to ask for the story.

**Joe:** *One of the things I think about Big Data is the fact that we're using it now, but we found the emptiness in it, and that's what's reverted us back to looking for dialogue and stories and UX's approach to telling better stories now and using more qualitative data, as a result.*

**Annette:** I agree 100%. That's exactly what I think.

**Joe:** *Is your book Territory Games, is that why that resurfaced a little bit and had a rebirth you think?*

**Annette:** I think so. I think that silos, and particularly I think that healthcare is the place where they've realized that because departments don't speak to each other and information isn't traveling in the way electronic health records promised it would. People are beginning to look for the answers to the question "why?" And I wrote Territorial Games in like 1996, 97 and I simply asked people to tell me stories, and it was those stories that highlighted these little micro behaviors that get lost in any sort of survey analysis or even observational analysis because it's hard to talk about little things that I gave big names, but a big game is shunning. But in practice that can simply mean not

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saying good morning or it could mean checking your phone when somebody starts to talk. These tiny details can corrupt the flow of information and sometimes stop it dead.

**Joe:** *You asked me maybe before or even during the podcast is how I use storytelling and where I first came across your work which was The Story Factor. What I find about your book is it gave six types of stories. What was interesting to me is it was stories that I could give sales and marketing people and say, "This is what you need to be able to repeat to a customer in the sense of who am I and who our company is and be able to tell a story about it."*

**Annette:** I don't know if you've sat through a mission statement fiasco before, but it's just painful in most circumstances. People can actually want to kill each other over the choice of the word. And it's meaningless without a story that brings it to an experiential level. I think that's one of the other aspects of storytelling. Storytelling by my definition is simply a narration of an experience that reconstitutes it into a virtual experience in the mind of your listener. And experience is the best teacher. Now storytelling is second best but it can get really, really close if you tell a good story.

**Joe:** *You spent a little bit of time talking about that storytelling is not about manipulation, it's more of what I would say is getting people to believe in you is the best way to influence them, not trying to steer them.*

**Annette:** To a certain extent we are trying to steer them. If you want to use the word manipulation technically, it's accurate. But authenticity is the criteria that will prevent true abuse of storytelling because the first story you tell needs to prove that you are authentic and trustworthy. Then the rest of the stories, if they don't ring true to that sense that you're a good person, and

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you're here for the right reasons, they're not so effective. As long as you have good intentions and you couple that with a sincere desire to learn this other person's story, to hear it, I think you're pretty safe on the Machiavellian criteria.

**Joe:** *One of the things I always think about storytelling now and we hear about it resurfacing and then you talked about that, but we kind of live in this sound bite society where one word is what everybody tries to steer everything to. How does storytelling fit?*

**Annette:** Well I think that that can work. When I was studying lawyers – this new edition is about all of the different applications, well that's part of what it's about –there was a wonderful paper written about embedding meaning into an object. Now this was a case of a serial killer, and he had a trap door into a crawl space where he stuffed the bodies. Now in a trial you're supposed to be limited to the facts. That's good, but it doesn't reveal the whole story. Now what the lawyer did is he got the trap door accepted as a piece of evidence. This trap door became embedded with the entire story of number one, how much forward thinking and intention and trouble he went through to create this repository for these bodies. It became a representative of what it was like to see that door and know that that's the last thing you'll ever see. It was representative of good and evil, air and light versus dark and lack of oxygen. Now I tell that story because this trap door, while it was simply a piece of wood, was embedded with several stories. If you can make your one word embedded with the story if you make sure that this one word recalls a complete fabric of the story, then yeah, that's great use that one word. For instance Nike and "just do it" – "just do it" brings all of these different stories to mind but the stories have to come first.

**Joe:** *Talk about in education we'll have debate teams, we're taught how to give presentations, is there training in storytelling?*

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**Annette:** Absolutely. I was in debate in high school mainly because the cute guys were in it. This is what they try to do is they try to train you on tone and posture and all that sort of stuff. The mistake they made was that they came up with one right way. Storytelling teaches you to pay attention to tone, but it doesn't tell you which tone to use. And so when we teach students that, in any form of communication about the power of storytelling, we are also teaching them about these different elements and how they communicate, not only adding stories but understanding that everything they do tells a story.

**Joe:** *When I look at the Ted presentations, the ones that are so resounding are the ones that tell the story in it.*

**Annette:** Yeah. Simultaneously to Ted this organization called The Moth has gained very much the same level of popularity. It began in New York City and is a show of people telling true stories on stage without notes. Now there is a lot of crossovers between what Ted teaches and what the Moth does and teaches and that is this idea of it being personal and using stories. The coaching that goes into the Moth stories can in certain situations exceed a year. The coaching that goes into Ted presentations is at least six months. And more and more they are using coaches that understand storytelling and help them find stories to tell.

**Joe:** *I have to ask you, when you give a presentation, do you use a slide deck?*

**Annette:** Hell no. I've been asked to do webinars, and I hate webinars because they want the slide deck. And I understand – and I'm doing one tomorrow actually – but there's two reasons I don't use the slide deck. One is that storytelling is much more experiential if you don't give people one thing to look at, but allow each person in the imagination of their own mind coming up

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with this sensory – five senses – experience as they reconstitute the story that I narrate. The second reason I don't use a PowerPoint deck is so that people understand that you can give a presentation without slides. And I want to prove it and demonstrate this could be you. You could do this.

**Joe:** *I always remind people of the comic up there. I said, "Who gives the better presentation and who makes you enjoy it anymore? Where's his slide deck?"*

**Annette:** Exactly. What a great use. Absolutely. Just one thing about humor. Humor is always about conflict, something that is and isn't at the exact same time.

**Joe:** *How would you recommend someone to become more proficient at storytelling or start? I would recommend to them *The Story Factor* but after that.*

**Annette:** Well after that whoever tells the best story wins and I say this because whether you use that a book or not that book teaches storytelling by teaching you personal stories. The art of storytelling is best learned when you tell personal stories, and I would always start with who I am and why I'm here. You come up with a quality that you have that earns you the right to be listened to. For instance, you're compassionate or you persevere or you're funny. The great example I learned is Woody Allen could stand in front of you and if you didn't know he was Woody Allen you would just think this is a nerdy geek, Jewish geek. Yet if he told you a joke, you would conclude, "Hey, he's funny." That goes back to what I was saying about how you have to let people come to their own conclusions. But when you tell personal stories, you learn something about how to tell a story, you learn something about how to find a story, and you learn what it's like to be the subject of the story. When you understand all of these things your ability to tell stories in any other situation is much

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improved. So that's my recommendation is to start with personal stories, specifically the "who I am" story.

**Joe:** *How did you get started?*

**Annette:** I've been studying psychology since I was 14 years old. I was a strange kid, and I just got stranger when my parents divorced. My dad who was a social worker didn't know what to do with me on Tuesday afternoon after school and before we went to grandmother's house for dinner at six. He would take everything he was learning about human behavior and teach me. I learned about transactional analysis, rational mode of therapy. For the rest of my life I experienced human interaction through the idea of, "Why do people say what they do? Why do people do what they do?" which often is not the same, as they say, they do, and "How do we influence each other?" When I began to study group dynamics, and that was my first formal training – this was my master's degree – I understood the power of stories simply by observing how the whole idea of good apples, bad apples, like you could have one bad apple and it ruins the whole group. And then in studying territorial games and trying to understand why people don't talk to each other, because we got plenty of stuff to shove us to talk to each other, and it's not working, we don't need to understand why people don't want to talk to each other. I had to ask stories to get at the truth. That was my first exposure.

I still didn't know I was doing storytelling. A Safe Place is just a way to facilitate people to tell the truth, and I was using storytelling to train the group. Before the dialogue I would say something like, "There was this one lady," and dialog, "that just wouldn't shut up. She talked because it seemed like she had a lot of anxiety. And whenever this guy would talk she would interrupt and blah, blah, blah." So I'd tell that story, and the impact was that whoever in that group was the person who couldn't shut up, and there's always one, they began to recognize themselves and

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self-regulate. That's when I began to realize that this is storytelling, and that's what it's doing; it's influencing people's behavior. And soon after that a friend of mine wanted me to write a book about storytelling. I was intimidated by the subject. I mean it was like writing a book about religion which of course is one of the best examples of storytelling. And even though daunted I sat down and tried to do it and that's what happened and resulted in *The Story Factor*.

**Joe:** *What is upcoming for you? Are you working on a new book or rewriting one?*

**Annette:** I'm continuing to write the second edition. I've been asked to write a second edition of *Whoever Tells the Best Story Wins*, which initially I wrote as a workbook because you can't learn storytelling without doing it. It takes practice. And like I said, I believe in personal stories. So I take the six stories, I give you four buckets to find four different kinds of story for each of the six. And now I'm turning it into more of a textbook by adding all of these different applications and demonstrating that storytelling is one way to understand the hidden meaning and to mine down, not only understand it, but interact with what is and is not meaningful to people. With this new edition it's a textbook for any kind of communication but I'm specifically pulling back from these different fields that now use storytelling and can teach us more about storytelling. Digital storytelling of course is big, but it informs more about social media and brand storytelling.

Healthcare has so many applications. We talked about that – patient satisfaction, patient engagement. Even in diagnosis, doctors are being taught how to listen to the story. They call it narrative medicine. The law – I have found that legal minds have taken story and in their drive to understand it revealed all sorts of different things that I had never thought of coming from a traditional storytelling place. Non-profits – non-profits have been

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storytelling ever since the first direct mail letter was written. They understand that giving is not a rational act by any behavioral science point of view. It's emotional. And so non-profits have a lot to teach us about storytelling. And then we talked about before user experience that these guys are just brilliant.

**Joe:** *Is there anything that you'd like to add that maybe I didn't ask?*

**Annette:** Some people think of storytelling as a fad or a trend and perhaps the word storytelling will go out of favor, I mean everything does in terms of management style, and the next new thing will come along. However, storytelling will never cease to be important because storytelling is how the human brain thinks. It's part of our past, present and future. And if you understand storytelling, you understand a whole lot about humanity, human behavior and the human experience.

**Joe:** *I think those were great words at the end. What's the best way for someone to contact you and to learn more about Annette Simmons?*

**Annette:** I have a website called [annettesimmons.com](http://annettesimmons.com). And my email is just [annette@annettesimmons.com](mailto:annette@annettesimmons.com). You can also look at my podcast which is not as frequent as yours, but I interview people who are experts on storytelling and find out what they've been doing lately. That podcast is called The Story Factor.

**Joe:** *And where do I find that podcast?*

**Annette:** It's on iTunes.

**Joe:** *Okay.*

**Annette:** And I post it on my website, as well.

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**Joe:** *Well I would like to thank you very much Annette. I very much appreciated it, and I thought you gave out great information.*

**Annette:** Well good. I had a great time. Thank you.

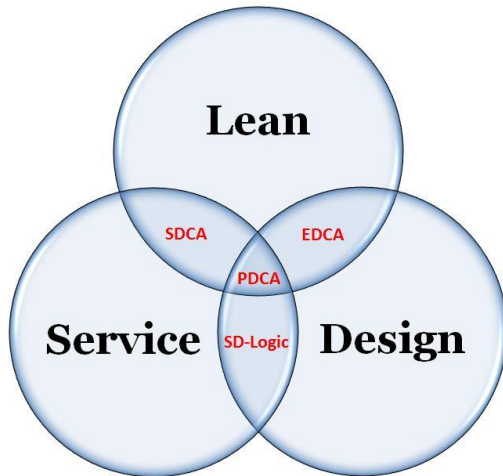
**Joe:** *This podcast will be available on the Business901 blog site and also the Business901 iTunes store. So thank you everyone.*

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Joe Dager is president of Business901, a firm specializing in bringing the continuous improvement process to the sales and marketing arena. He takes his process thinking of over thirty years in marketing within a wide variety of industries and applies it through Lean Marketing and Lean Service Design.

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