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Storymapping your Product   Guest was Donna Lichaw

Storymapping your Product

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Storymapping your Product

Transcription of Interview

Joe: Welcome everyone. This is Joe Dager, the host of the Business901 podcast. With me today is Donna Lichaw. Donna guides startups, non-profits and global brands in optimizing their digital products and services by providing them with a simplified way to drive user engagement through impactful storytelling. Donna is the author of 'The User's Journey: Storymapping Products that People Love.' Donna, thanks for joining me today and tell me a little bit about your consulting practice and what it's about, because there's got to be more than storytelling?

Donna: Thanks for having me, Joe. Yes and no. What I do is storytelling, and it's more than storytelling, and it's not storytelling as well. The essence of it is I workshop with teams, and I have them figure out what their customers really, really want to do and need to do with their product or service that is going to make their customer feel heroic, in the sense that when you download an app that… what's an app that I downloaded recently? Oh, it was this photo app that my partner and I, we have a 7-week old and we're taking so many photos and it's beginning to get a bit out of hand and we met someone on the street who had a baby and she told us about this app that has saved her and helps her put photos up so that it's not on social media and yadda, yadda. Here's why it's amazing, we've been using it for a week now, and we both feel victorious because this app is saving

us so many headaches.

The idea is that all products, and when I say products I mean it could be software, apps, websites, it could be physical products as well, all products people use to do something that solves a problem for them. When they solve that problem, humans are simple; we feel good about what we do. The idea is that as a company or a brand, you and your team, it's your job to really dig deep and uncover what people really want to do with your product or your service and to build a story around that so that you can walk people through step by step to kind of give them a helping hand and to better understand why they would want to try your product, what they can do with it, and to make sure that your product actually delivers, and people are heroes by the end.

Joe: Well, I have to frame the conversation a little bit for the people listening and you probably have been asked this question since you wrote the book in every interview and every article, but could you define the idea of storymapping, which is one word, versus the more traditional though, like what Jet Patton does and story mapping, which is two words.

Donna: 2 or 3 words, if you call it its full name, which is user story mapping, but absolutely. The idea is what Jeff Patton works on and teaches in his book 'User Story Mapping' is wonderful and when he writes about it as well, is the idea is that a way to organize Agile user stories. If you work on an Agile team, you probably phrase your requirements as these things that we call user stories. It's something like as this type of user; I want to do X so that I can Y. The user stories developed or started many years ago because they wanted to kind of flush out requirements. They didn't just want to build things willy-nilly and wanted to better understand, okay why are we building this is the first place and not just, you want me to give you a log-in screen, but what's going on

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there. User story mapping in the Agile sense, what Jeff Patton works on, it's a way to organize large scopes of work and to prioritize what features your products really, really need. Because as anyone and I think a lot of your listeners are going to know what this feels like, but anyone who has worked on large software projects know what happens when you get into a little bit of scope creep. You start building something, and it's supposed to take a few months, the next thing you know, it's a year later, and you haven't launched and everyone's unhappy. And so user stories and user story mapping is a wonderful tool for Agile teams to organize large scopes of work.

When I talk about storymapping, one word, which spell check is always trying to get me to correct like it's not a word, but it's a more old school traditional sense of building stories, the kind that you would do when you're creating a film. My background is actually in film-making and storymapping is something that I learned many years ago. It was actually one of the first things I learned even before how to use a camera and the idea is that when you're crafting a story for a film, whether it's a 30-second or it's a 2-hour opus or a 40-year-old soap opera that's a T.V. show, you have to have story arcs and story structures flowing through everything that you put out there for an audience. This idea of storymapping, it goes back to Aristotle, and the idea is that you have plot points, and they go in a certain order, and they're all structured to get a hero from wanting something or needing to do something, to then meeting their goal at the end. And then they're a lot of nuances between how you plot them together.

My background is in filmmaking. I've been working in technology and software development, product development for almost 20 years now and at some point, what I started realizing working in tech is that we talk about users, we talk about customers, we talk about journeys and flows and how we're going to get people from point X to point Z,

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or we build these products and they're very, very complex, and what I realized at some point and I talk about this in the book, I was working with a startup that had a product that was completely failing, and we couldn't get people to use the product. We couldn't even get them even to click on the sign-up link. Maybe they did, but they didn't move forward. At some point, I just started wondering, could the same structure that a film-maker uses to engage an audience in a movie theatre or at home on their couch, could that same structure work to engage an audience when they're thinking about using your app and then maybe guiding them through using your app, whether it be the first 30 seconds, or the first 7 days, the first year for 7 years. What I found over the last several years is that yes, the two have a lot in common. It's really mapping stories as in mapping plot points, but I can't call it plot point mapping because that would sound kind of boring.

Joe: *When you're saying storymapping, am I talking stories for the product, or for let's say the whole product development piece, or am I creating a movie out of it? I mean, is this a Disney production and I'm having a story map for a whole movie?*

Donna: No. It's a great question. That's probably the top question people have for me which is, am I talking about telling stories about products or is it something else? And so the way I see it and the way I work with teams to build stories is that a story at its bare minimum, it's just a squiggly line. It's structure. It's a diagram. It has certain plot points that you can plug and play, and I go into detail in the book. I also have a workbook that people can download for free on my Website that walks people through how to plot some simple stories. Once you've got that simple diagram or a series of diagrams, you can use those story maps to pretty much do anything.

You can build a marketing campaign, so now you will know how to talk about your product.

If you're trying to get people to click on ads, this will give you an idea of what type of keywords you need to be using, which is great if you're working with a marketing team or you're working in sales. If you're actually working in product development or design, these stories will help you figure out how to let's say you're building a landing page, and you need to figure how do we on this landing page communicate what this product is and why people should click on it and what the button should say and then once you click on it, what's the next screen, and the next screen, and the next screen.

It also will help you figure out how basically any flow or prototype should work. So it could be a checkout flow or a payment flow or something that seems really boring, but that's really important to your business. Let's say you find that people are always abandoning the shopping cart, and you want to get people to buy more widgets. Mapping stories will help you figure out how to get people over those hurdles and to think about things like cliffhangers and why might people be dropping off. Also, it will help you think in terms of the way stories are structured is that they have high points, and it ties into how people remember things and it goes into a lot of behavioral economics and getting people to be really glad that they just paid for $20 for a widget on your website.

Let's say you're working at a company, and you've got a new idea for a feature, and you want to go pitch it to your product manager, or you're a project manager, and you want to pitch it to an executive. Mapping out the story first will help you figure out how to go into that meeting and then tell them why this idea is amazing, or if you're looking to get funding. To answer your question a little more, you can make movies out of this if you want to. Some teams that I work with, sometimes after they understand what the story is, they'll use it to build prototypes and to build the actual product itself, but they might also use it to make a demo or a video. The demo they might show internally, or they might put

it up on the website, and that communicates to everyone why this new feature or why this product is awesome. You can use it for everything, like comics and the list goes on and on, but the way I see it is stories flow through everything that humans communicate and understand.

Joe: *I think of an old project management trick that we used to do, and I still do is that you write the press release before you do the project. And so that was kind of like telling the story of what the project was going to be about, so you put some context to it.*

Donna: Absolutely. Writing a press release is a wonderful exercise that ties into this because that press release has a story structure to it. This case that is in the book whereas one example, I mapped out the story arc of Slack. Which is a communication product that is kind of exploding on the scene now and a lot of people still don't understand what it is? Is it email or is it chat? I don't understand. Actually, I think this was last week on an episode of Silicon Valley, and they were talking about it, and they were like, is it chat or is it email? I don't understand. What is Slack? What I did in the book is I mapped out the story structure of what Slack is. I think about a week later; I was reading the New York Times, and they did in the text section a review of Slack. What I noticed is that the review reads like a press release in essence. It was about 5 paragraphs long, and it mapped out onto each of the 5 plot points.

Because story writers, news writers, tech writers, journalists, they have been trained in the art of mapping stories before they go write an article, and so they know what they're doing. It starts at the beginning, and you're introduced to who you as the reader are and why you might be interested in Slack. You have a problem like hey; you're overwhelmed by email and communication, and Slack is a way to minimize how much you communicate

and how much you have to email, which ironically Slack actually creates more messages, but that's another story. But yes, writing press releases, they have stories. News articles have stories. Movies, they've got everything. I always joke that I story mapped my or I don't joke, it's true, but I story mapped my wedding. It was a huge success. People loved it. And so anything that people experience has a story to it, and it's your job as people who create and build products to make sure that that story is successful and structurally sound as possible.

Joe: *You talk about 5 points and is that similar to a hero's journey, is it the same thing?*

Donna: That's another great question which is something called the hero's journey which is Joseph Campbell's model for storytelling. Anyone who isn't familiar with Joseph Campbell, they're probably still familiar with Star Wars which is one of the earlier movies that used his ideas to map a hero's journey and map out over one movie and then over three movies. Joseph Campbell, his diagram that he uses is a circle and what I use with the teams that I work with, with my clients and what I teach in my workshops is using a narrative arc which goes back more to Aristotle and some old German playwrights. The idea is that you have a series of plot points, and the reason why I like the arc is because it's based on a timeline. You have a beginning, middle, and an end. Whereas Joseph Campbell's hero's journey, it's a single that kind of goes around and around and what I find is that circles just end up being confusing when you're talking about product development because everything we build, people experience as moments in time. In other words, there's step 1, step 2, step 3, step 4 of flow. You might have many different variations of that, but everything is basically linear. So I stick with the narrative arc just because it's simple and it's so fast to use. It's really easy for me to grasp, both for the teams that I work with.

The idea is that at the beginning, you're introduced to the main character, you're introduced to what they want in life and then something changes or goes wrong in their life and things get more interesting, and wacky, and exciting, or more just valuable and exciting over time and then something like there's some kind of conflict or tension and there's a high point often. In the movies, there are explosions at this point, and then you have to kind of come back down to planet earth and have some kind of conclusion and things winding up. It's simple but if anyone thinks, oh my god, I have a film degree, and I love Joseph Campbell's story circle instead, that's a wonderful tool as well.

Joe: *When we're talking about storymapping, is it really a map? Can I relate it to let's say storyboarding that you would do, like let's say that you're on the Disney storyboarding type? What do you mean by that?*

Donna: What I mean by map, it's just a series of points that are connected. It's a map in the sense that it's a path, and so when you link all the plot points together, you're creating a path that you want your customers or your users to take. And that path or journey, again it could be split seconds where you run into someone on the street, and they tell you, oh my god, it's so cool, x, y and z, and you get excited about it, or it could be a map of a journey that you want people to have. One project that I worked on with a non-profit, what we did was we mapped out a 7-year journey that their members had. Actually as with all of these, it's always based on actual data or research that we have, or if you're working on a Lean team, and you are trying to innovate for example, we might us story maps as a way to put hypothesis out there and see, hey we think this is the type of journey someone could have or that this is what someone might think about our product or service, and then you can go test that out. It really is a map in a very literal sense, as in it's a diagram with

points that are connected that visualize a journey.

Joe: *When I'm listening to you, I'm thinking, okay I'm going to create this great story, and I can see how that story can kind of be somewhat generic that I really don't differentiate myself enough to make an impact with that story. I mean, is that the point of the story is that it's like, pop, I remember what Slack does. I know what Slack does because there's a story associated with it?*

Donna: In essence, the story that people experience where the impact is felt by people. For example, let's say Slack. Basically these days we have so many ways to communicate, and it can get a bit overwhelming. You have email, you have IM, you have Twitter, you have this and that. And so, what if there was a way for all of that communication to be consolidated in one place, in a kind of a passive way where you don't have to be inundated with emails all day long. And so Slack, it's a communication tool that unlike email, unlike Twitter, unlike on, and on, and on, all of your communication is in one place, and you can access it when you want or you don't. That's the story of Slack at the highest level. In the book and in my workshops, I call that a concept story which it answers the question, what is your product or service.

And so that type of story, if you're building a product from scratch, if you're working on a Lean team, you can test that out in a way where you actually start doing customer interviews and you might start running the story by people and seeing if that's something that resonates with them, or you could run out onto the street and that's something I've done with a lot of companies is we run out to Starbucks for an hour and we just talk to people and we just shoot ideas past them. So, that's at the highest level. Now, if that's something that people think is a good idea, then the idea is that you have to build that into

the product because if you build a product that doesn't deliver on that, if the high point, the climb of that Slack story is that its seamless communication and everything is all in one place. The product has to embody that. The first time that you ever use Slack, that same story arc flows through your onboarding experience where they explain how everything works, and you type a couple of words, and I click this, and I click that the next thing I know, I understand how to use Slack, and I see how easy and how simple it is, and I understand how all of my communication can be in one place.

That same story, all those plot points have to also then be echoed in every key flow. Every time I use Slack, it has to feel that seamless and the ease of the communication and the all in one placeness of it has to be the last thing I remember. At any point, if that's not the case, I'm not going to use Slack anymore. That's something that a lot of companies, once they've been around for a few years, they really need to figure out which is, all right we've delivered on our value proposition for the first year or so, and now people are really getting sick of our product because now they're having this problem. How do we either reimagine what the story of our product is or how do we reconfigure our product so that it continues to deliver on that story?

Joe: *It sounds a lot like branding. This is my brand, the story?*

Donna: It is, and that's what's so funny because I come from design and development, and I've always worked with design teams, product teams, development teams and I think only once have I ever worked long-term on a marketing team. I think actually that was a really great experience because what I learned from them is that there's nothing worse for a marketing team than trying to market a crappy product. They might get people in the door but then once people use the product, they get pissed off, and they never return. And

so they may have high conversion rates, but then the marketing team has a really hard time of getting returning customers back.

What I found is that I started developing this model of putting stories together before building out products, but then during and then while testing products I started developing it working with product teams, and design teams, and development teams. But when I bring marketing teams in, like if it's a corporate workshop that I'm running, I always try to make sure that people are there from marketing, from sales, and that people represent the executives in one way, shape or form, and it becomes sort of the great leveling of how marketing and with development, because the same story structure that can be built into a product, into every user flow that makes your customers happy is the same story structure that your marketing team can use to go create their ad and sell the product.

Joe: *I think that so true because what I think of it is that when you don't follow the story, there's a disconnect. It's like running an advertisement, then someone walking into your store and if there isn't connection, then there a disconnect right away and they're apprehensive. It's like, what's here? What's going on here? I think that goes into the digital world to is that when they open up your product, there's an expectation already of what's behind the curtain by the story you told, right?*

Donna: Absolutely, absolutely. You know I almost hate bringing up Apple products because I know people get sick hearing oh Apple, Apple, great! Everyone puts them up on a pedestal, but there's something to say about the value proposition that a company sells as part of their brand or that sells in an advertisement being echoed through actually using the product itself. And I remember, it first kind of hit on me many years ago when I showed my dad the very first iPhone I brought at home. I was visiting, and I brought it

home, and I showed it to him. I gave him a little demo of it. I just remember the first words out of his mouth were, "Wow! That's like magic." And I remember thinking, yeah, it kind of is. He was a big Star Trek fan, and I was too and like we've seen this stuff in the movies, but having that kind of demoed in front of him, he just thought that is so cool. And it wasn't until many years later than when I was doing research for the book and working on workshops and my materials and really developing is the idea of mapping stories that I went back and looked at Steve Jobs' keynote for the first iPhone, and that's what he said. He said, "This is like magic." So again, it's not just about being a master marketing person which is great, but it's about than building a product that echoes that long term as people use it and within each and every flow. So as soon as your device isn't working like magic, you got to figure it out.

Joe: *When I first start with storymapping, do I have to start at the beginning or do I picture it at the end? What's the best play to start?*

Donna: There isn't a right or wrong way to start, but what I love doing and it's actually what a lot of storytellers do like screenwriters, and filmmakers, and novelists, I find it the most useful and the most fun to start at the end of the story or kind of starting in the beginning and then going right to the end. First, you have to understand who your main character is, and once you have an idea of that, you go immediately to the end which is what is their big goal? What do they need to accomplish? A quick, sort of clip notes example that I gave in the book and I like it because I always remember it, but the idea is something like the iPhone. Well, what do you need to accomplish? And to figure that kind of ending of the story, often I use something that's called the 5 Why's, and this is an idea which is what does someone need to accomplish with an iPhone? Well, you could say to make a phone call or to have their phone and their music all in one place. But those are so

microscopic, so you always want to ask yourself why.

You can do this again innovating and just working on a hypothesis, or when you're actually going out and doing customer development and talking to your customers and doing user research. If someone tells you, I want to make a phone call, ask why and then you keep asking why. Well, because I need to call home. Why do you need to call home? Because blah, blah, blah and you go on and on. Once you ask 'why' 5 times, you always go down to the big, big, broad human need. If it's something like the iPhone, it's that we need to communicate with the world around us. Once you've figured out that what your customer really needs to do is communicate, by the end of the story, they have to communicate with the world around them. That's the last plot point, and then I like to work my way back and then just kind of fill in all the points on the map. That's something that takes practice but is actually so simple that when people do it for the first time, they just realize, wait, is it really that is and then you just practice a little bit more.

Joe: *Tell me, what's upcoming for Donna? What do you have in the works?*

Donna: What I have in the works is actually a bunch of things. The book is now out, which is really exciting and so I want to get it into as any hands as possible. I'm going to be speaking at a bunch of events this summer and in the fall, and I'm also going to be bringing my storymapping workshop on tour. The first one's going to be Vancouver in July, at the Design and Content Conference. And yeah, throughout the fall, I'll be bringing that around to hopefully a city near you. I've got all the dates in and everything's up on my Website, and that's at donnalichaw.com.

**Joe:** *Tell me the best way to get a hold of you and find out more about the book.*

Donna: The best way to get a hold of me is through my Website. It's donnalichaw.com. There are lots of blog post goodies on there for people who have either read the book already or thinking about reading the book. I've got a free workbook there as well that people can use. All my contact information is there. And for any of your listeners, I love when people who have read the book or have attended any of my workshops reach out. I'm always accessible, and you can always grab me for a phone call or just shoot me an email. I love seeing how people are mapping out stories at work, on their own teams, and for their businesses. So please, please, everyone reach out. I'm here. I'd love to catch up and see what you're all working on.

Joe: *I thought it was a great book, and I thought it captured storymapping very well, on what to do and give you a nice template. And for those scared about telling a story, this is something you can follow, and you only get better as you continue to have a way of doing something, so I wanted to compliment you on that.*

Donna: I'm so glad that you enjoyed it

Joe: *This podcast would be available on the Business901 iTunes store and the Business901 Website. Thank you very much, Donna.*

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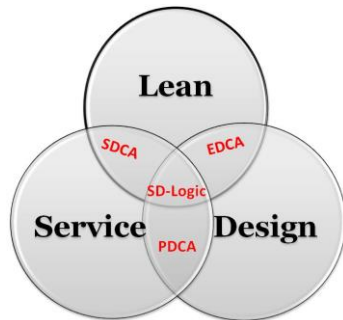
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Joe Dager is President of Business901, a firm specializing in bringing the continuous improvement process to the sales and marketing arena. He takes his process thinking of over thirty years in marketing within a wide variety of industries and applies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

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