

054: How You Can Use Storytelling to Win Customers

With Kim Houlahan

Kelly Lawson 0:00

Nothing inspires quite like a great story. People have been captivated by stories since the beginning of time. And today, it's the very reason that any one of us will get lost in a good book or binge on Netflix. Storytelling is essential to our human existence. It helps us draw a connection to the things around us while also appealing to our intrinsic emotions. And when it comes to business storytelling, it's a highly effective strategy that is so often overlooked. Let's take some familiar ones. For example, like the rise of Apple's enigmatic Steve Jobs or how the Kardashians got their start, by telling the whole story, you tap into your audience's emotions and genuinely connect with them. Your story makes you memorable and can lead your potential customers into believing in your product and or service and what it stands for gently encouraging them to buy without being salesy. Every company has a story to tell. And if your business can't properly convey its story, your products likely won't have as much appeal to your audience as you want them to. to perfect your story. My friend, professional storyteller and business Coach Kim Houlahan is here today with some tips to get your creative storytelling juices flowing. Kim talks about the easy strategies you can use to get started with your own business storytelling, and she does a phenomenal job in her own business. So if the word storytelling for your business makes you squirm a little, you'll be in good hands today.

Intro Voice 1:44

You're listening to the workshop weekly podcast The show where no dream is too big and no topic is too small. Around here. We believe that taking imperfect action rules, so we're creating space for you to dive in and fast track your success one workshop at a time. Now refill your coffee cup, grab your notebook and get ready to join in on your weekly training. Listen to meaningful conversation and learn from industry experts. here's your host, Kelly Lawson.

Kelly Lawson 2:12

Hello, Kim Houlahan. Welcome to the show. I'm so excited to chat with you today. How are you?

Kim Houlahan 2:17

I'm good, Kelly, thanks for having me.

Kelly Lawson 2:20

Well, I need to start by saying first that I received the most beautiful email from Kim a few weeks ago. And it was a story that completely pulled me in. And I have to also say that I'm no stranger to content overload, I get so many emails, I even have big email marketers sending me text messages nowadays. And I don't know how to politely pull out of those either. But your email stood out among all the other ones. I read it from start to finish, and it was the greatest story. So

why don't we talk a little bit about what brought you to the point in your career where you're telling these amazing stories and what it is that you do for your clients?

Kim Houlahan 3:01

Well, what I do for my clients is I am their online, virtual marketing department for small businesses that just don't have the bandwidth. And the actual storytelling came, maybe seven or eight years ago, I was doing email marketing, but I met a fella named Michael Katz did a course with him. He's in the States, he calls himself the email guy. And he said, You got to get in front of people and be the likeable expert. And the way to do that is tell people about yourself, you need to be more personal, you need to share Kelly, I don't want to tell you that you are the queen of this, by the way.

Kelly Lawson 3:39

Thank you,

Kim Houlahan 3:40

I feel like people get to know you very easily, even if they've never met you. So I started to tell stories. And it was really hard at first, because as much as I'm extroverted I'm a little bit private, but they started to flow. And I think I started to get into a regular routine of every two weeks, just tell your story. And I always connect the story to a marketing idea, or a marketing tip or a way that a small business can improve something in their day in their business. So it really is that pivot from this is what happened to me, oh, and that reminds me in your business, you should potentially do this. So it's a formula. But it is a way for me to let people know about me and learn about me. And also let me help them in their business.

Kelly Lawson 4:28

So I'd love to ask you a little bit more about your formula and how you do that. Because I think a lot of listeners probably they'd really like to do that. They love the idea of it. I mean, it does take a little getting used to and I'll speak for myself, I definitely am more of a private person. And so I had to step out of my comfort zone. And you do it so eloquently. I mean not just anybody can pull out a beautiful story that some of those things into the abyss to an audience that I wasn't 100% sure who they were how they'd receive it. So it comes with a lot of insecurity as well. So how do you navigate that? What's your formula? What are some tricks that you use to do that?

Kim Houlahan 5:09

Well, it's funny, when I first started, I thought, I have this list of all the things that my clients struggle with. And then I have some solutions, you know, like high level deeper solutions to those struggles. And so that is how I want to end my emails to help them with now they're working from home, what are the tricks or doing their email, marketing all these things? So I had this list and I thought, well, I'll just write a story. And then I will connect it, I'll start with the ending. But that is not how it works. It is not how it works. You have to think about your stories, things that happened to you. I went to the market the other day, and I saw that their signs, I couldn't read them. If they can't read them, then in your business, Can people read your signs. Tell the story that I was walking through the city market, the oldest building in the world. And

anyways, it's that connection, but I have to start with the story. And the solution comes in the story writing. I know it sounds really crazy, but I do know all the things that I want to say. But in writing the story, it occurs to me that it's about persistence. No, it's actually about knowing your audience. Oh, no, it's about so really start writing the stories.

Kelly Lawson 6:19

Yeah. And I think that there's something to be said, first of all about how eloquently you're able to do that. But also the fact that learning doesn't have to be so factual and boring. And in today's age of digital education, the possibilities are really kind of endless. Like, we don't need to learn from textbooks from boring people standing at the front of the room anymore. I'll respect to all my former professors. But there's a new way that we can do it. Now we have new mediums we can include B roll, we can include descriptive stories, we can use ways to pull people in. And I think that that's what you have demonstrated so brilliantly. And I think if only more people could understand how to do that effectively in their businesses, we'd all definitely like what do they say a rising tide would lift all ships, like, I think that what you have to teach and tell and show people will help them in their own businesses. So that's exactly why I brought you here today. And I'm so pleased that you so generously obliged, but I'd like to back up a step. And let's talk a bit about your career path. How did your career path lead you to here?

Kim Houlahan 7:23

Well, I started with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in photography, I realized very quickly that I didn't want to earn money with my camera 100%. And that's a long story. That's another podcast. So I ended up in marketing positions in ad agencies in sales as an account executive. So that's where I got my marketing, training. So BFA training, basically on the road, in the marketing agencies, and then working on the client side. So it just lent itself to starting my own business, because I liked the small businesses. And I knew I could help I felt like I brought value to small business, I could see very easily how they could improve things where they couldn't see it. I was always surprised that, how can you not see that if you just do this, then this will happen. But it's because they're too busy running their small business, you understand that. And so I started my own business and focused on small businesses. And that's where I am today.

Kelly Lawson 8:23

Amazing. And I love that you said that, because I think that a lot of us are really guilty for getting in the weeds in our own businesses. And because you're so entrenched in the day to day operations, that it becomes really difficult to step back and really see your business from the outside and see the potential opportunities, the way that somebody on the outside of your business may see it. So I think for anybody who's listening, that feels like I don't know what my opportunities are anymore. I'm so caught on this hamster wheel and just kind of running my business day to day, it can be a complete breath of fresh air to have someone on the outside who sees what you're doing, say, Hey, have you ever thought about this? Because when I see your business, I see an opportunity over here that you might be missing? And I just, I don't know, I've only really kind of started exploring that a bit myself in realizing that when you're in it, you don't necessarily what's the saying you can't see the forest through the trees or something like that. And it sounds like that's what you're able to do for your clients.

Kim Houlahan 9:20

That's a great segway, because it's actually that process that brought me to the marketing coaching that I've been doing over the last couple of years. And it's not like I wasn't coaching all along. And really part of my process with my retainer clients has always been that we meet once a month, it could be a phone call, and sometimes we miss a month but we meet and I started putting some structure to that because I realized I'd say so like how are things going? And I know they're like, I don't know, I said Well, are things better for you. How close are you to your one year goal. So I started putting some rigor into it. So when I met with them, I brought a spreadsheet and this is what you said last Last month, so they can see the progression of sales of whatever you want to measure and focus, start recording it. And so I just held them to their own goals. So I would help them make goals. But most of the time, they knew what they were, and I just hold them. But when you said, you're too busy in your business, this is where these monthly meetings, everything stops, stop everything for an hour and a half. We're talking about this figured out, pivot, whatever we're going to do, Okay, go.

Kelly Lawson 10:30

And I think too as entrepreneurs, like, again, back on that hamster wheel are really guilty of not measuring our results. And when you think about it, that's like, your most important role as an entrepreneur or CEO, or whatever your role is, inside of your business, is to measure your results. And if you're not setting targets, then how can you do that? So it sounds so simple, but I know that a lot of entrepreneurs are guilty of not doing that. So I think what you're doing is amazing, and it can only do good things for your clients. Why don't we talk a little bit about some of the How to stuff. So, for example, what are the steps that listeners can take today, to achieve success in setting goals and measuring the results?

Kim Houlahan 11:12

Well, I start with a plan. And you know how deep you can go as an entrepreneur, where you're doing your, like deep branding, visual branding, all of that I do start with a plan. And that plan is what we look at every month, it's who you're talking to. And it's what you want to say. And I try to keep it simple. Once we've kind of nailed down what it is, I mean, once a year, we might adjust those things. But just keep it simple. And then pick one or two channels to focus on especially if you're busy. And be there, even if it's one be there. And as long as your clients are there, figure out what you can do consistently, because the really key thing is, you have to continue to do it over and over. So do something that you find is fun, if you don't like to write podcast, or find someone to write for you that where you can give them a bullet point or where you can have a phone call, I have clients where it's a phone call, I write their blogs, it's whatever you're most comfortable with. And then do it consistently. And the consistency in your branding. And the frequency of your communications is key, it's like waves coming in, you're always going to be top of mind, always, it sounds really boring. But if you do something that's fun, and you keep it fun, then the consistency is not boring. And you can keep changing it up. I mean, you can kind of change your direction and focus, because every month you're kind of looking at the results of things. And then number four is regularly monthly, take the time to review, even if it's by yourself, and I've got a form that is a bit of an agenda of what I look at. And then I stopped with

my client and say, What is it that's going on right now? What can I help you with? What do you want to talk about what's getting in your way? And really doing that on regular basis is key.

Kelly Lawson 12:53

Yeah, and really just holding them accountable, right? Because in a lot of cases, we're in our businesses all by ourselves, there's nobody there pointing their finger at us to say, Where are you with that thing that you were working on last month. And we just let those things fall off our to do lists and into the abyss. And as a result, we're not really paving this clear path to success or growth or more sales, like you said, whatever that looks like for you and your business, wherever you want to be two years, five years, 10 years from now, you're never going to get there. If you don't sort of make a plan and clear a path. There's, of course going to be obstacles along the way. But that's just normal. All you need to do is learn how to try to solve those and see if that worked. And if it didn't try something else.

Kim Houlahan 13:37

And it sounds so simple. But the reason why I'm doing more and more of this pure marketing coaching, is because people really feel it's effective. And some clients at the end of the marketing coaching session will say, Okay, can you do some of that? And others will say thank you and they take it and they go and do it. So it really just depends. Some people rely on me to Okay, now can you write that? And can you update the website and can you do this, but I don't need to like it really is up to you take it back to your team.

Advertisement 14:09

So you bought a fancy camera or you're thinking about buying one because it's clear to you that there is no shortage of beautiful moments or things in your life that you'd like to capture beautifully, but the record scratches because all the dials and buttons and settings are standing between you and your life in stunning photos. Well, my friend I have just the fix the ultimate photography starter kit. This free resource includes a recommended equipment list, Quick Start checklist, and a beginner's guide to creating natural poses and candid moments. To give you the confidence you need to dust off that fancy camera and start documenting your moments so they can last forever. The ultimate photography starter kit is completely free and it is everything you need to get started. So grab yours today at Kellylawson.ca/starterkit. That's Kellylawson.ca/starterkit. And I can't wait to see your framers in my scroll.

Kelly Lawson 15:17

So just to review your four steps to effectively market your small business is to step one, have a plan and know who you're talking to, and what you want to say to them. I mean, that's kind of the most foundational first step, if you don't intimately know who your audience is, and the exact person that you're talking to, it's going to be really difficult to choose topics and use language that's going to resonate with them that they're going to relate to. But the step two that you said, I want to dig into that one a little bit, because you said, pick one or two channels, and focus on that and figure out what you can do consistently. So what do you say to your clients who are like, I don't want to just pick one? Because that's going to isolate all these other people? Like if I

just pick Facebook? What about all those people on Instagram? Or if I just pick Twitter? What about LinkedIn? So what do you say to those people who challenge that

Kim Houlahan 16:07

Try to figure out where your target market is, if you're feeling like, I really like Facebook, but they're over on Instagram, then maybe you need to figure out Instagram. Also, if you think they're in both places, or you're trying to bridge that gap, do both, like do both if you feel like but I feel like I'm just gonna say an email marketing is the way for you to build your own list and not have your list sitting on other platforms. Email Marketing is really important, it's really important for you to build that, especially small business people, because you don't know where your audience is going, and Facebook, and they're all shifting all the time. So I would say email marketing, plus one or two. But if you can't handle to, then do one,

Kelly Lawson 16:54

Yeah absolutely. If you're focusing on one, you're going to do that one really well. And if that's where your primary or your target customer is hanging out, like why not just serve one person really well, instead of a whole bunch of people kind of mediocorely. Is that a word?

Kim Houlahan 17:11

It's a good word.

Kelly Lawson 17:12

But to your point in social platforms, changing all the time and email marketing, sort of bubbling to the surface as a priority, I would have to echo what you say. And the reason that I'm saying that is because I have just started running Facebook ads for my digital programs. And what I've learned from doing that is that iOS, so Apple products have rolled out a new feature inside of their software that allows the user to disable cookies. So basically, now they're giving the control back to the user as they should to control what advertisers are able to do with their data. So this is going to impact small businesses, this is going to impact every ecommerce business on the internet, because the prediction is that two thirds of people given the option to disable cookies or intranet tracking, if you will, are going to opt into that. And that's going to change your ability to market using social platforms. And this is only the beginning. We're just gonna keep giving power, hopefully, to the users themselves. So what do you think about that?

Kim Houlahan 18:18

I'm just gonna go back to the emails, you have to create emails that people when they see your email pop up, they go, Oh, I want to read that. I don't have time. Now. I'm gonna go get a cup of tea. I can read it on Saturday morning. You want to be that email? I mean, if everybody thinks about their inbox for just a second, what are the emails that you want to read? What are the emails that you enjoy, be that be that email for your people. And that's what I'm trying to do with mine. And so not being able to advertise to certain people, I feel like it's absolutely a great idea that we can turn things off and on, I love that. But as marketers, we need to create content for the people that we're trying to talk to that will interest them and help them and support them.

Kelly Lawson 19:04

Absolutely. And as long as you're kind of keeping it over on email, you own those relationships. There's no cookies or internet tracking or any of that with emailing. It's simply you're sending a message directly to the individual person. And nobody is going to kind of step into that. I mean, they can obviously decide to unsubscribe or filter your emails, but at the same time, that's something that you own. That's your own territory. It's not borrowed land, I guess, so to speak like social media can be. So Kim, I know that you exemplify this really beautifully in your own business. I know that you tell stories and your blog posts, like you said, you do it every two weeks. And it's always like a personal story that leads to that tip or idea for people to better market their small businesses. Can you talk a little bit about kind of what works and what doesn't or in your experience, like what people respond to versus what they don't respond to or how you identify what they might care to hear about or not hear about?

Kim Houlahan 20:02

Well, because I understand my client pretty clearly because I actually am my client as a small business person. So it's funny, even in this podcast, not only am I trying to help people, especially women navigate their businesses, but also if they're interested in being a marketing coach, that's also something I'd like to help them to do. I feel like it's kind of a two way street. So because I understand my client really clearly, I know what their pain points are. So if I just talked to those things, then they're listening. And it's not like every single small business person has every single issue that I'm talking about. But we're all in the same club. We're all feeling the same pain that I answer that question.

Kelly Lawson 20:46

Yeah. Misery enjoys company, they say. And I know that you also have provided free resource for listeners that looks a little bit like a DIY marketing coaching, can you talk a little bit about that free resource?

Kim Houlahan 21:00

Yeah, you can beat it up and make it your own. But this is what I start with, with each client. And it's a process. In the agenda that we go through every month, we look at the tracking documents, I look at their checking document, which I've also included, we review goals. Of course, in an initial meeting, we set the goals, we talk about what's new, and I just write right people processes, products and promos, that gets the conversation going. We don't always hit on all these things. But if I asked what's new, then these are the things that we need to either promote, or talk about or get updated on the website, or this is all fodder for content for our upcoming posts or upcoming blogs. Then we do a bit of a content chat, because you know what's hitting and what's not. It's so easy to take a quick look at Facebook and Instagram and say, why did that hit? Was it the time of day? Was it the content? Who's liking this? Why are things just falling flat? and learn from that as you're moving forward? I mean, you start to realize the kind of content that really hits. And then what we add to our next agenda, because we're always moving this process along. And so the document I send to people just before the start of our monthly meeting, I asked them, What have they accomplished since our last session just as high level? Because we do have goals? What have you done? What are you working on right

now? Because there's a lot of things that happened in that month that I'm just not aware of. And if I asked what they're working on, it helps us move that forward. Do you need any help with anything? Really? That's really what we talked about? We'll hash out we'll brainstorm. We'll do all sorts of stuff in that meeting. And then what will you accomplish by the next coaching session? That's just what I'm going to ask about next month. How's that going?

Kelly Lawson 22:41

Yeah, I mean, it sounds so simple. But I know how much entrepreneurs really kind of need that accountability. So can you talk a little bit about some of the results that you've gotten for clients just following that simple process?

Kim Houlahan 22:53

Well, it's funny, everybody's different. And some clients when I start asking them about the numbers from the last month, and if they're not doing that well, and they're hesitant, I was like, you don't have to, but let's talk about this, what's going on in your business, and then start to look at, especially at this time, look at other products that maybe we can push forward, and what we should focus on and what we should stop measuring right now, because you can't do it. I don't want the meeting to be about, oh, here's all the things that you can't do. It's let's focus on what you can and then be creative. So I think in some respects, I think the key to these meetings is that you can put yourself in check that yes, you are moving forward. And yes, I do have a plan. And I have somebody that I can bounce it off of. I think the result of that is that they're meeting their goals. They're hitting their goals. And actually, in a couple of cases, they're changing their goals, because they're meeting their goals sooner. So just pick a goal, I feel like just pick it. Well, what if I want to do more, I feel like well, we'll just every month we meet, you can make it bigger. So if the goal is just simply revenue, then that's pretty easy to track. And if the goal is something else, it really is that you can actually meet them because you can see them and because you can do something about it. So yeah,

Kelly Lawson 24:04

Yeah. Sometimes it's just as simple as actually setting the goal. And like to your point, especially as you're starting out, you're making those up until you start to set them and measure them and track them and see what you're capable of and what you need to do to grow. Really, that could be the simplest part. And sometimes you don't know what's working and what's not working until you put it out and either pass or fail. And I know that we have this negative context with the word fail. And I always sort of blame like our grade school experiences, because fail was something that you never wanted to do or you never wanted to get that dreaded F on your test. But I think that that was a bad lesson for us. I think failing is really just part of this process. And we need to get comfy with it because it's really just a test. And like any other test, it's okay to fail. Some of them you're going to it's just inevitable if you're not failing some of them. You're not setting your goals high enough. That's how I would look at it.

Kim Houlahan 24:57

Absolutely. Absolutely. And I think you might have failures in some parts of your business and not in others, and so I try to get people to at least celebrate what you're doing, right? Because

you might forget, because you're so bogged down by a part of your business that you can't seem to launch when the other part is actually doing fine. So you can't forget what you're doing right. And I think that is helpful to have somebody come in and look at it from the outside and say, Wow, all you're focusing on is what you're not doing, which is a ridiculously small amount of what you're actually doing. But I think as a business owner, and you know, this, Kelly, that's what sits there in your can't, I'm not I can't, nobody's phoning me back, you do focus on that negative stuff.

Kelly Lawson 25:39

Yeah, I used to be a lot worse for that than I am. Now. I almost turned this corner, probably about five years ago, where I was like, Wait a second, why are we so against failure? It has so many great qualities, I think we need to like flip this on its head a little bit. And I think if more people would just get comfy with the fact that failure is a good thing. They would accomplish bigger things. That's just my little prediction. But yeah, also like, Don't lose sight of the great things that are happening as well. It's not all about the failures. And in a lot of cases, like I know, something that I get hung up on in my business. And it's still something that I need to be coached through all the time, is if I get some negative comments, say on social media, for example, something like that some negative feedback, and I shouldn't say feedback, because I think that's a completely valuable, indifferent thing. But it always depends on who it's coming from. And so I would just let myself get completely derailed by something like a negative comment. And then I would realize, first of all, what a detriment that is to the people who aren't leaving negative comments and who are really like loving what it is that I'm doing, like, why am I giving the control to this kind of one person who probably doesn't even really care that much. So that's something that I definitely have to work on pretty much like every day. And I think it's a bit similar. But back to your point, it's important to focus on the good stuff, and to not let the bad things derail you. They're just little signs, they're just giving you like a little message of a potential problem that you might need to solve. And as entrepreneurs, that's what we are, we're problem solvers.

Kim Houlahan 27:11

Absolutely. I had a client, who was just new to going online. This was a few years ago, and somebody complained about it was strawberries complained about a product and when they got home, and he said, I don't know what to do. And I said, Well, what would you do if they walked in the store? And he said, Oh, well, I would just give him a new and I said, just do that. Just tell them that. Just try to I mean, there's some people that are just you cannot answer them. They're just irrational. But try to think about what you do if you were face to face with them. And how would you resolve that?

Kelly Lawson 27:43

Yeah, that's a really good point. Think about what you do if you were face to face with them. And in some cases, I think, if you were face to face with them, they may not say that thing that they said on social media. So you can always take some comfort in that, too. So Kim, I always like to wrap these episodes up with like a really nice, actionable piece of send off advice. So what is

one thing that listeners can do today to get a big step closer to effectively marketing their small businesses?

Kim Houlahan 28:10

Oh, I've got nothing. I'm just kidding. I just have a bit of an analogy that I thought would be fun to talk about. After doing this for a few years, I started thinking when I got married, my husband said, Look, you look after the wedding, and I'll take care of the marriage. And I thought, Oh, that's easy. Right? See marketing your business, like a marriage, you got to get your house in order. First, you know, you gotta get your strategy and your planning done, figure out who your ideal customer is pricing, branding, all that stuff. That's the wedding. You know, that's the big tada at the beginning, right. Tada. And then there's the marriage, and you have to keep that house in order. And this is where I think people struggle. It's not boring. But people might think of it as being boring. It's consistent. It's where you do your email marketing, your social media, your podcasts, your blogging, your phone calls, your sprinkling, whatever you're doing, to keep that steady rhythm going in your communications. That's the marriage. So that's like the wedding. And I feel like the marriage is important. You can't ignore it. It is the consistent thing that you do to keep things above water and moving for you.

Kelly Lawson 29:19

Yeah, I mean, it may be the less sexy part of it. But it's the most important part of it. The big spots that you do at the beginning is fun, and it's great. And it's exciting. And there's lots of details to consider. But now your job just started.

Kim Houlahan 29:33

Yes. I love it.

Kelly Lawson 29:36

So plan a marriage way better than your wedding and you'll be all set. Kim, thank you so much for coming on today. I think that all of the work that you're doing is so invaluable and the advice that you gave today is also invaluable. We'll be sure to include your free resource in the show notes so people can grab that and kind of dig into coaching themselves if they need to, and get in touch with you if they need a little help. Thank you again.

Kim Houlahan 30:00

Great. Thanks, Kelly, nice talking to you.

Kelly Lawson 30:03

So once the moral of this story today, you ask, it's this storytelling isn't just for marketing. The benefits extend well beyond a simple ad. I hope after today's episode, you have begun to think about how you can weave your stories into your own business narrative to draw a connection with your fans, pepper your stories throughout your social posts and your website, arm your sales reps with your origin story of your brand's founding, or let your customers use your unique story to attract new customers. After all, a good story is super fun to tell. It makes us feel like we're part of something and it's addicting. It's why we binge Netflix and it leaves your fans

wanting more. So please, never underestimate the power of a good business story. To connect with Kim or find any other resources mentioned in today's episode, please visit the show notes at Kellylawson.ca. And until next week, workshop warrior, I can't wait to hear your business stories so I can draw a deeper connection with you too. So get out there and shout it from the hilltops.

Intro Voice 31:19

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