

Finding Passion for Your Work, One Story at a Time

Guest column by [Paul Smith](#), author of [Lead with a Story](#)

JATHAN JANOVE: *In this story, my guest [Paul Smith](#) explains how, to his great surprise, he found meaning in marketing toilet paper. Paul is a keynote speaker, corporate trainer, and former director and 20-year veteran of the Procter & Gamble Company. He's the bestselling author of three books on harnessing the power of storytelling for some of the most important work we do as humans: [Lead with a Story](#), [Sell with a Story](#) and [Parenting with a Story](#).*

EVER HEARD THE ADVICE: "You really need to love your job"? It's usually offered unsolicited by an overconfident boss who thinks the rank and file will find it inspiring, or somehow turn their drudgery into a rewarding experience. Does it work? Of course not. You can't order people to love their job. That just gives them inspiration to quit and go somewhere with more exciting work. Far better to help them find the passion for their work. One of the more effective and creative ways to do that is through storytelling. Here's a case in point.

In spring 2009, I needed to find that passion myself. I had just been asked to take a new position as director of consumer research for Procter & Gamble's paper business. That meant I was going to be in charge of consumer research for, among other things, *toilet paper*. That didn't sound very glamorous, or even interesting. I immediately formed a host of prejudicial notions about what it would be like to work in the toilet paper business. I couldn't think of a less important product in terms of impacting people's lives. Plus, for a marketing researcher like me, there couldn't be many unexplored ways you could talk about how soft and absorbent a piece of paper was, right?

Fortunately, my first stop with the news was to see my friend and co-worker, Jeff Brooks. After suffering through the obligatory potty humor, he ended up telling me the following story that helped me appreciate my new role in a way neither of us expected at the time.

At the end of a weeklong business trip to Budapest, Hungary, Jeff had a short train ride to the airport for his return home. He sat next to a fellow American, now living in Budapest, so they struck up a conversation. When she found out it was his first trip to Hungary, she asked him what he thought of it. In a very cordial manner, he replied that he liked it very much, and that there was much to do in Budapest. After finishing the socially graceful answer, however, he began to tell her a little more about what he really thought.

"The people were very nice," he said, "but they all seemed a bit melancholy. Depressed even. And the weather

was beautiful, so that wasn't the problem. Most of them just seemed irritable and unhappy." He went on to describe in detail the behavior he saw that led him to his dreary conclusion. As he did, the woman nodded and smiled knowingly, as if to agree with his assessment. When he finished his story, the woman turned quietly and looked out the window in a contemplative manner. After a long pause, and without even looking back at him, she sighed, and said matter-of-factly, "I think it's the toilet paper."



Okay, it's funnier when you hear the story told in person. But the woman was dead serious. Here's the point. Toilet paper may seem like a pedestrian, unimportant part of people's daily lives. But imagine what your day might be like if all you ever had to use for toilet paper was the thin, rough, cheap tissue you might imagine to be typical in Budapest 15 years ago. If that's all you ever used, you might be constantly chafed and slightly irritated in your nether region. Perhaps not so much that you thought about it constantly, but enough that it might just make every day a little less pleasant. And that might make you a little more short-tempered with a visiting businessman from the States, as well as anyone else who crossed your path.

The implication to me for my new job was this. We may not be curing cancer. But what we do matters to people probably more than we realize, perhaps even more than they realize. One of my prejudicial notions had just evaporated. The toilet paper business still wasn't going to be glamorous. But at least it felt more meaningful now.

What I came looking for when I entered Jeff's office was a sympathetic ear to commiserate with. What I left with was an eagerness and passion for my work that I hadn't even started yet. Since then, I've told this story to dozens of other newcomers to the paper business. Most of them, it turns out, came with the same preconceived notions I did.

Conclusion: If stories can help someone get excited about working on toilet paper, imagine what a good story can do for the business you're in. Ask yourself the following questions:

- 1) What is it that makes you come to work every day?
- 2) What events or moments were the most inspiring?
- 3) What were the most pleasant surprises about working where you work?
- 4) What prejudicial notions did you have coming in that have totally evaporated?
- 5) What fears did you have coming in that never materialized?

Ask others you work with the same questions. Find the best ones and share them with everyone else where you work, in the employee newsletter, in team meetings, via email, posted on the company website or breakroom walls, or printed out and stuffed in paycheck envelopes. You'll be well on your way to more passionate, engaged employees.

Source: Adapted from [Lead with a Story: A Guide to Crafting Business Narratives that Captivate, Convince, and Inspire](#), by Paul Smith.