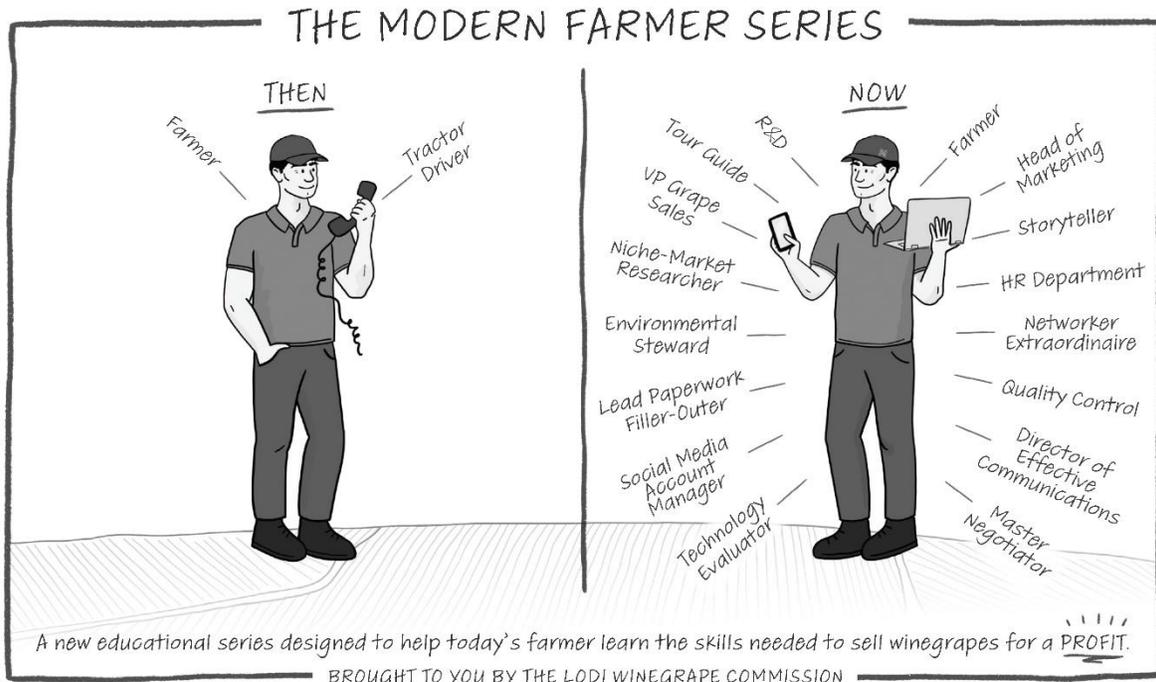




LODI WINE GROWERS



STORYTELLING: THE SECRET TO SELLING YOUR GRAPES

by Lisa Cantrell, PhD

What causes a buyer to choose your grapes?

Certainly the grape variety, the vines, the soil, the farming practices, the price, and the climate in which the fruit was grown all matter. However, even with the perfect grapes, buyers still sometimes seem reluctant to invest. Finding the *story* behind your vineyard—and learning how to tell it to your buyers—may be the missing link needed to boost your sales.



Carignan harvest at Spenker Ranch by Randy Caparoso.

Stories give value to products

In 2009, authors Joshua Glenn and Rob Walker set up an interesting [experiment](#). They bought objects from thrift stores and garage sales and then turned around and put them up for sale on eBay. By all accounts, the objects were not worth much. Glenn and Walker spent \$128.74 in total on the trinkets, paying less than \$2 for each item. However, they sold the items online for nearly 28x more than they had originally paid, grossing at nearly \$3612.51. (Don't worry, they didn't pocket the money; they donated it.) But how did they do it?

Walker and Glenn used *stories* to sell the objects. When the two men posted each item on eBay, instead of simply advertising its physical traits (e.g., "this pony figurine is ceramic"), they told a [compelling narrative](#) (e.g., "my mother painted this figurine and gave it to my father a few years before he died"). Buyers were not only willing to purchase the objects; they were eager to pay high prices. Stories gave value to the products.



Horse figurine in Glenn and Walker's "experiment."

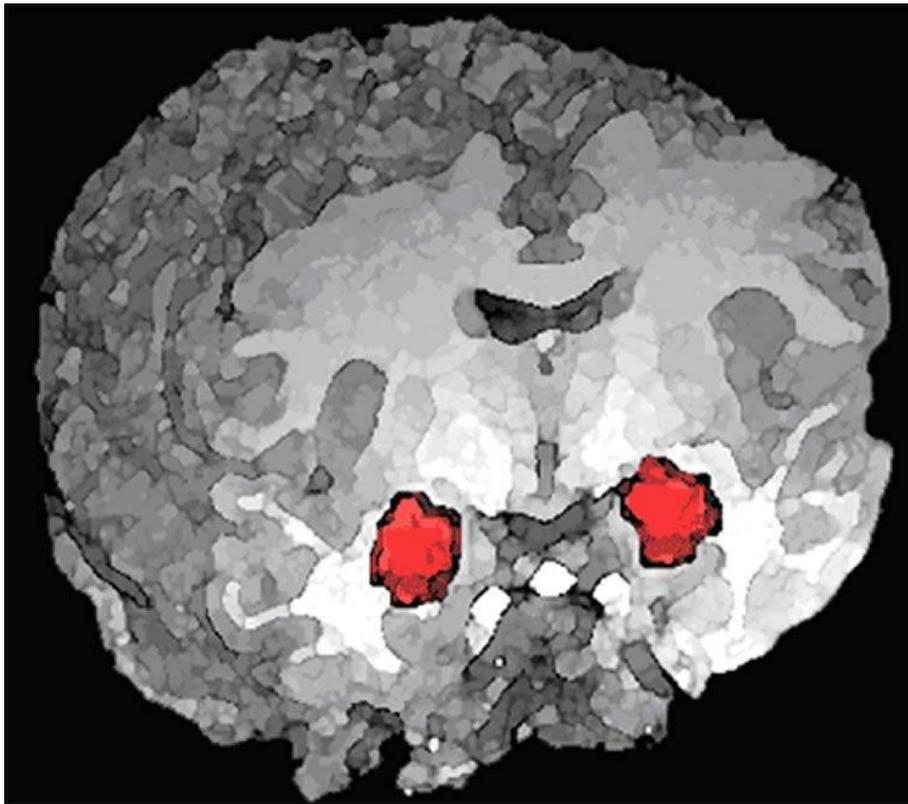
They bought it for 99 cents.

It sold for \$62.95.

Why do stories sell?

Stories engage our brains in a few ways. First, a good story tugs at our emotions—and emotions are key to making decisions.

Neurologist Antonio Damasio has studied a group of patients who have who have damage to a part of the brain that is responsible for emotions. His patients often show little response when presented with emotionally reactive scenes such as a car crash or a crying child—which may come as no surprise. However, his patients show another oddity: a *complete inability to make decisions*. When faced with a choice, these patients evaluate the pros and cons, wring their hands, consider all outcomes, but fail to choose any option. Damasio has concluded that [emotions are critical for decisions](#)—including decisions about what and when to buy.



Patients in Damasio's study had damage to the amygdala—a region of the brain involved in emotions.

Emotions—the kinds that push us to invest—are tapped through stories.

In a [series of studies](#) conducted by professor Deborah Small at the University of Pennsylvania, she and her colleagues found that people were more likely to donate money to a charity when a story was told. In their study, potential donors read statistics about starvation or they read a story about an individual girl named Rokia who was living in poverty and had little to eat. People gave more money to help fight hunger when they read about Rokia than when they read the statistics.

This is Rokia. Her life would be changed for the better as a result of your financial gift.

With your support, and the support of other caring sponsors, Save the Children will work with Rokia's family and other members of the community to help feed her, provide her with an education and basic medical care.



When donors saw a picture of an individual girl named Rokia and read her story, they gave more money to fight hunger.

Stories not only tap into emotions, they make products *memorable*. In a [study](#) conducted at California State University, Fullerton, researchers found that people were better at remembering information when it was embedded inside of a story; they were not good at recalling facts when the information was presented in a list. Thus, if you want a potential buyer to remember that your vineyard has historic own-rooted vines, is planted near the Delta, or that the grapes are a special clone of Zinfandel, don't just list the details; tell them those facts inside of a compelling narrative.

How do you tell a story about grapes or a vineyard?

Every vineyard has a story. I have not yet talked to a Lodi winegrower whose vineyard *did not* have an interesting history. The trick is finding it and knowing how to tell it.



Here are some tips on identifying your story and sharing it.

1. **CHARACTER:** Every good story has a character we love. Who is the character in your vineyard's history? It may be your aunt who immigrated from Italy and settled in Lodi because the climate was similar to her home country. It could also be the large walnut tree that has gently watched over the fields for the last 54 years. Identify who the character is.
2. **FOCUS:** Most vineyards have multiple characters and stories. Pick just *one*. For example, the vineyard may have been planted by a former winemaker-turned-winegrower who had a passion for good grapes. That same vineyard may also have been planted in the hills near a now abandoned saloon where the spirits of a bygone age can still be heard. Both of these stories are compelling; but only tell one of them. A buyer will remember your story better if it has one central character and focus.
3. **EMOTION:** If emotions are what make stories "work," then make sure your vineyard's narrative has them! Telling how a character has overcome a struggle is one way to elicit emotions. For example, if your great grandmother left her home in Northern Ireland searching for land to farm in California—tell us that. Such a story causes us to feel her loss, the struggle of her journey, and then her triumph as she settled new land, and it generates admiration in us; there are a lot of feelings wrapped up in that one tale. Give us something we can immerse ourselves in and that can make us feel sacrifice, nostalgia, or joy.

Final thoughts on storytelling and your vineyard

Once you come up with your vineyard's narrative, there are a few other things to consider when using the story to market your fruit.

Know your audience. Tell a story that is most likely to resonate with your particular buyer. A [study conducted at Vanderbilt](#) revealed that customers were more likely to buy a product when they could relate to the story being told. If you know that your potential buyer is a big sport fisherman—and the vineyard founder also loved fishing—tell them that. If another buyer has young children, and your vineyard was planted by a father and his two young sons, that's a great story to share with that buyer.

Always have your story (or stories) in your back pocket. Have a short 30 second version and a longer 3 minute version ready to go at any moment. A short version can go on a [Vineyard Tech Sheet](#) or might also be an elevator pitch to a buyer. Your longer version is the beautiful one you weave when you have a few minutes of someone's time.

Practice your story. Don't assume you can wing it. Practice saying your story aloud! When the moment comes to share a story with a buyer, if you haven't practiced, you may flounder or fall back on just "listing the facts" and lose the sale. Know your story and rehearse it so that when the opportunity arises, you can share it with confidence.

Is it cheating to use storytelling to sell your grapes? It definitely gives you an advantage, but I argue that stories are a foundational part of who we are as humans—it is how we connect, build trust, and understand the world—and when it comes to marketing, a smart seller recognizes that their product has a unique story. They learn to tell it and then they use it to compel their buyer.

Now go find your vineyard's story and tell it.

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Dr. Lisa Cantrell is a psychologist, professor at Sacramento State, and the Founder of Capital Storytelling. She has been a story contributor to KQED and KALW, writing print stories and producing radio pieces in the Bay area.

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