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# The importance of storytelling in your farmer program

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### Notes to broadcaster

Radio is based on the oral or storytelling tradition. Broadcasters like to call themselves good storytellers, and it is by telling a story that we can grab and hold the attention of our audience. All program segments should tell a story, whether they are dramas, interviews, discussions, or any other format.

This broadcaster info doc describes the basic elements of a story, provides a checklist on the qualities of an effective story, provides one example of a story, and closes with a few storytelling tips.

**Introduction**

Many radio formats can be used to present issues in a farmer program – interviews, call-in shows, scripted pieces, vox pops, to name a few. But all of these formats can be made hugely more effective *if they tell a story*.

The word “story” is used in many ways in radio. In its widest definition, it can be anything and everything that you broadcast (for example: "Do you have the World Cup story?" or "Have we got a climate change story this week?" or "What’s the story about the singer and the cabinet minister?")

But the word “story” is also used in radio to describe a *very specific kind of narrative*. This kind of story is at the heart of African legends and Shakespearian plays and modern novels. This kind of story uses a *very specific form* to capture and inform and motivate its audience. When you have an important message to convey, it is worth putting a story at its heart, and unleashing the power that a story can bring.

Briefly put, a story is a narrative about

* a *empathetic person* (an “empathetic” person is someone who listeners can relate to, or can have “empathy” with)
* who *encounters a complication* or problem
* and *takes action to resolve it*

It is that simple!

To return to the examples mentioned above, the World Cupstorymight involve a champion goalkeeper or striker who fractures his foot but keeps playing through the pain until he wins the championship. The climate change story might feature a family of farmers who plant a short-season, drought-tolerant maize after prolonged dry weather has destroyed a whole season’s maize. And th*e* story about the singer and the cabinet minister might involve an ambitious minister missing a critical meeting because he is involved with the singer, and having to rebuild his life after being thrown out of government.

Much of what we put on radio is *not* in the form of a story. Examples include weather forecasts, market information, newscasts, talks and lectures, lists, instructions, advice, ceremonies, and announcements by officials. These forms of radio are valid and also have a role in a farmer program.

But an item built on a story is king!

A story has power and effect because it *engages* the listener. It stimulates the listener to be active, to *create mental pictures* that illustrate the oral story. And when the listener is engaged, she or he remembers the story and its message, and is then better motivated to act.

Why are stories so effective? Three reasons:

1) A story *grabs and holds the attention of the listener*. It does this by using a *dramatic* form: it is about *people* and their *struggles*. We care about *people.* We don’t care so much about *facts*. Stories

* draw the attention of the listener through their presentation of a empathetic character
* hold and build that interest as the character struggles over what to do when faced with the complication or problem
* provide satisfaction as the character reveals the action she or he took to resolve the complication

2) Stories *help the listener remember*. They do this by using *evocative description* to create *mental pictures* – of persons, places and actions. (An “evocative description” is a description that inspires or draws forth or “evokes” memories, images, and feelings.) This evocative description engages the listener’s imagination, and that is the key to *remembering*. Evocative description can come from a single sound, a few words from a narrator, or from a clip of the character herself.

3) Because of the story, *the listener also remembers the issue* that the story illustrates. The farmer might listen for the drama of the story, but at the same time, he or she is exposed to important information about an important issue. By engaging the listeners in the issue through their attachment to the personality, struggles, decisions and actions of the empathetic character, stories can help them to

* understand and remember the heart of a complex issue
* consider how the message in the story could play out *in their lives*
* build the courage, commitment and momentum to make a change

**Checklist: the qualities of an effective story**

A *story* will have

1) a *main character* who

* is an equal with local farmers (not above them)
* has a personality that draws listeners’ attention and interest, that listeners find compelling
* talks about how he or she has dealt with the problem at hand
* talks about how he or she has implemented a solution to the problem

2) a *narrator* who

* in a few words, paints a clear picture of the situation in which the farmer finds him/herself
* in a few words, links together various voice clips of the main character to provide order and movement to the story
* wraps up the story in a way that relates to the problem and solution

3) a *production* which

* emphasizes clarity and drama and gets to the point quickly
* uses sound and descriptive language to stimulate the listener to create mental images

**Story example** (courtesy of Bob Carty, CBC (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation) Radio)

**SFX:** *A hoe working rather tough soil, a man breathing heavily with the labour*

**Narrator:**  Benjamin Erinle has been working his soil in southeastern Nigeria for two decades. Since his father died. And most years have been good.

**Clip of Benjamin:** This was good soil, good soil. We used to get enough maize to

feed our family all year round. Sometimes the rains were not good, but most years we had enough to eat.

**Narrator:**   Benjamin’s hands are strong and heavily calloused. He is only 35 years old but his back is bent like an old man's. And his eyes show a gleam of worry.

**Clip of Benjamin:** The problem started about five years ago. The weather was good, but the maize yield was down. We only got enough to feed the family for ten months. And then it got worse. The following year we only had enough maize for eight months. I had to sell some animals and work on a big farm. My soil is tired.

**Reporter:** How do you know?

**Benjamin**  There was a man who came. He sells fertilizers. He said my soil does not have enough nitrogen. Nitrogen. That's why the plants were not producing.

**Narrator:**   Nitrogen helps plants grow. When maize doesn't have enough nitrogen, the leaves turn yellow, starting at the tip with the yellow going back, in a V-shape, right down the leaf. Benjamin’s maize is suffering from a nitrogen deficit. And the salesman from the fertilizer company had a solution.

**Clip of Benjamin:** He said I need to buy his fertilizer to get more maize.

**Reporter:** So did you do that?

**Benjamin:** No, no. It costs too much!

**Narrator:** Nitrogen fertilizers are made from natural gas found in oil wells. And their cost has been rising very fast. Farmers like Benjamin need another solution.

**Clip of Benjamin:** If I bought fertilizers, I would have to sell animals and use all my savings. And what if the children got sick? What if the rains didn't come? We had to do something else.

**Narrator:** Benjamin heard of a low-cost way to solve his problem. At the market, he heard a farmer say he had sick soil, but made it better by planting cowpeas in between the maize plants. Benjamin thought that was a great idea. But his wife, Clara, was not so sure. It was not the traditional way to grow maize.

**Clip of Clara:** If you put two plants in the soil, they just take food from each other. And neither one grows well. We have always grown maize on its own, not with cowpeas.

**Narrator:** But Benjamin wasn't sure his wife was right. After all, in a healthy forest, there are many different kinds of plants. They seem to help each other grow. So he decided to try an experiment.

**SFX**: *Walking though fields*

**Clip of Benjamin:** Two years ago, I planted cowpeas in between the maize plants – but just in this part of my field. Not everywhere.

**Reporter:** How big is this section?

**Benjamin:** About one-quarter of my land.

**Reporter:** Did you watch how the plants grew at the beginning?

**Benjamin:** I used to come here every day to check. They came up, both the maize and the cowpeas, and both were growing well.

**Reporter:** Were you worried?

**Benjamin:** A little bit. Because if it didn't work, we might have less maize. But it would only be a little less, so I wasn't too worried – except about what my wife would think!

**Narrator:** At harvest time, he stopped worrying. Benjamin got the same amount of maize in the area grown with cowpeas as he had in the section without cowpeas.

**Reporter:** So you didn’t get any more maize?

**Benjamin:** No. But I didn't get any less. And we had cowpeas to eat!

**Reporter:** So you were not disappointed?

**Benjamin:** No. It takes time to heal a body. It will take time to heal the soil.

**Narrator:** Benjamin was patient. He did the same thing the next year. He planted the same one-quarter of his land with both maize and cowpeas. And that's when he saw the difference.

**Clip of Benjamin:** (*Laughing*) Oh, man. You should have seen the plants. Big and strong. They grew right up over my head! And no yellow on the leaves. And when we did the harvest – wow! We got as much maize from that quarter as from all the rest. The soil seems better with the cowpeas growing in it.

**SFX:** *Either pounding maize or stacking bags of maize*

**Narrator:** Benjamin has discovered the benefits of intercropping. His harvests are

bigger and healthier because the roots of the cowpeas put nitrogen back into the soil. Now the soil has enough nitrogen. And the maize grows better.

**Clip of Clara:** I had doubts about this, but look at this harvest. We have maize for the whole year – and cowpeas too! The only problem for me now is that my husband thinks he is right all the time!

**SFX:** *Fade up more pounding of maize, then fade out*

**END**

**A few storytelling tips**

**Write a focus statement:** Once you have an idea about the story you are looking for and decide who you will interview, create a focus statement for your story. This will help keep your interview focussed. Once you have completed your interview, you can revise the focus statement as needed.

To create a focus statement, use one sentence to describe the essentials of the story. Ask yourself: “Who is this story about?” “Who is the main character?” “What is the problem?” “What does the main character do to try to solve the problem?” “What is the outcome?”

A focus statement should have the form: “*Somebody* doing *something* for *a* *reason*.” In the story about Benjamin, the focus statement might be: “Benjamin intercrops cowpeas with his maize to restore the fertility of his soil and feed his family.”

**Use storytelling tools in scripted sections of your piece:** Though the bulk of your story will be told (and *should* be told) in your interviewees’ voices, you should create a written script for several parts of your piece. This might include introductions to the program and to interviews, transitions between interviews, interview questions, and the conclusion.

These sections are important elements in your story, and provide the opportunity to use storytelling tools.

Strategic repetition, humour, surprise, and variations in rhythm and timing are all important tools of the storyteller’s trade. You can use these tools in your brief scripted sections to provide entertainment and capture or keep listeners’ interest as the story moves forward.

When listeners hear humour on the radio, for example, they stop what they are doing and listen more carefully. The same applies to any emotion – anger, sorrow, tears, surprise, shock, etc. The emotion is always what is remembered, so take advantage of these opportunities to evoke it.

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