

EPISODE 252: JASON ROSS & FRANCIS LYONS – NO STORY = NO SUCCESS

Francis Lyons

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Female Voice

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Ken White

Welcome to Leadership & Business, the podcast that brings you the latest and best thinking from today's business leaders from across the world. Sharing strategies, information, and insight that help you become a more effective leader, communicator, and professional. I'm your host, Ken White. Thanks for listening. Whether a startup or a Fortune 500 company, it's more challenging than ever to cut through all the noise and competition to reach new customers, partners, and investors. One requirement for success is a great story, and often one that can be told in just seconds. In today's world, the best story wins. Well, last month during Homecoming Weekend, the William & Mary Entrepreneurship Hub hosted a storytelling workshop titled What's Your Story? William & Mary Alumni, Francis Lyons and Jason Ross, both successful creatives and founders of top ventures in media, tech, and entertainment, led the workshop. Afterwards, they sat down with us at the entrepreneurship hub to talk about storytelling, the importance of a compelling narrative, and how today, no story equals no success. Here's our conversation with Francis Lyons and Jason Ross.

Ken White

Francis, Jason, thanks so much. We just finished the workshop here on Homecoming Weekend. It was absolutely awesome. So thanks so very much for coming. Both of you talked a lot the importance of storytelling in various sectors. Francis, can you talk a little bit about that? Why it's so important to all of our listeners who work in business?

Francis Lyons

Yeah, because you ultimately, no matter what you're selling, whether it's a product or a service, you want to connect with some kind of a customer. And one of the best ways to do that is through storytelling. Creating characters that people can relate to who are battling and overcoming problems that other people can relate to, and showing the resilience and everything that it takes to do that. So it's very important that, no matter what you're selling, that you can tell a story and show that you are a trusted person who can help that audience achieve their goals.

Ken White

You mentioned both of you several times. It's not about you. Obviously, it's about the audience, but a lot of companies miss that. Why is that?

Francis Lyons

I mean, and I've missed it myself because you love your idea. You've spent so much time on your idea, and you think you're a genius, and you've got a solution. So you want to go out there and talk about yourself. But that's not what it's about. It's about the problem that you're solving for that person. And as I mentioned in the talk, I always think about it as, you are not Luke Skywalker. You are Yoda. The hero in your story is the person you're helping. You're just a little green guy that doesn't look so great, talks funny, but has all the answers. Or he's going to work with you, even better yet. Yoda didn't have all the answers. He was just working to help you to achieve and find the force.

Ken White

Jason, you were in music in a band. How did you get the storytelling?

Jason Ross

I think that songwriting puts a certain constraint on being able to find an emotionally resonant frame to talk to another person. I started off as a songwriter and eventually evolved into a storyteller in TV and film and technology. Those constraints in each one of those disciplines were different, but they were all similar in that journey, as Francis was talking about, between the initial challenge, which you might find in act one or in the verse, and this opportunity to overcome that challenge through a transformational act and arrive at something, a new piece of knowledge that solves that problem for you is basically every brand's story and selling everything from songs to Kleenex to cars to anything. Creativity, I found, was a transferable skill, as we were talking about in the talk today.

Ken White

Yeah, that was interesting. I don't think people think of it that way. Can you tell us a little bit more about that?

Jason Ross

Famously, I can't remember who said it. It might have been Joan Bayes. But it was like, if you can't write poetry, write prose. If you can't write prose, write songs. If you can't write songs, you should be a copywriter, is what I would add to the end. I think that, especially, some of the things I learned, I think here, Francis and I started writing screenplays together when we were at College of William & Mary, and eventually went into business in a number of different disciplines. But in each case, identifying what the story was about that business was the first thing that we needed to land before we could go and launch them or raise money or do anything, edify an idea into a practical thing that we're out there selling. From a creativity standpoint, I think it's more about problem-solving, and some of the things you need as an entrepreneur are also the things you need as a creative. I went from songwriter to executive creative director in an agency that I founded. Our problems that we were solving for our clients every day were creative problems. How do you take a technology that no one's familiar with and doesn't even know that it's solving a problem for them, because they don't know they have a problem yet, and tell that story? We did that for a lot of technologies in music, specifically. I found that it was as edifying or rewarding or satisfying to solve those problems as it was to sit in my dorm room and write a song. That was the spark of entrepreneurship, where it was like, creativity isn't only limited to songwriting, painting, making television and film, and things like that. Building a business is an incredibly creative act, and almost now in the current state of the world, I think a revolutionary act.

Francis Lyons

I mean, the thing you learn in all storytelling is make sure you have a beginning, middle, and end. The fact of the matter is, every business has a beginning, middle, and end. Every problem, whether you're a lawyer or whatever, there's a beginning. You've got to work through the middle, go up and down, do your research, and then you're going to get to an end. I will never forget when I realized after I had been in TV for a while, after I had been in the manufacturing industry, I was like, wow, I was doing just as many creative things when I worked at an interior door plant, coming up with ways to buy wood off of the ocean and then finger joint it together and then figuring out ways to manage people who I had no, nothing in common with. It's like this is the same creative mindset and entrepreneurial thinking that I have to do on TV.

Ken White

So a business comes to you and says, We need a story. Where do you start? How do you help them through?

Francis Lyons

I think you first have to identify what motivates them, what motivated that business.

Jason Ross

The origin story of the business. Like today, we talked about the narrative anchor. A lot of businesses will start with their mission and values because their mission and values has to be embedded in their branding, and their tagline, and their motto. So ultimately, whatever that narrative anchor is becomes the decision maker when the CEO is not available to answer you. So the values and the mission of the business, if your mission, today we were talking about Apple, is think differently in the '90s. That was right after we graduated from college. So it was a very impactful marketing campaign at the time, but still is, I think. That branding becomes, and it's a story, becomes an answer to every employee's question internally and externally when they get to that crossroads of, Is this right for us, or is this not? Which way should I go? That story should be the thing that is like the lighthouse out in the distance, or the lantern just a few feet ahead of you that predicates like, Okay, I know which way to go because I know what my story is. And so a lot of founders, I think, but most importantly, I think, have to find some emotional resonance in the why did they start their business? What was the transformative act? What was the challenge? The meteor came in from nowhere and landed on my head, and this is what. And I had to pick myself up and go solve this problem. And that story can be funny. It can be heartbreaking. It can be. And those are all things that we see in a novelistic sense, in a cinematic sense, in any discipline, it's as important business.

Francis Lyons

And I would say that storytelling and having a story is even more important now, because even in the Apple situation, they came up with that think differently after they'd already been making stuff there at the '80s. But so back in the day, if you just had a product, it was good enough. When Henry Ford came out with the car, it was like, Oh, yeah, you don't need a horse. You know what I mean? He didn't need a great story. But I think now there's so much competition in every discipline that you need a story. What I was thinking about that we didn't mention was Bombas. Bombas are amazing socks, so comfortable, so colorful. They're amazing. But what I think about with Bombas is that they're given a free pair of socks to somebody else. I've heard those CEOs and founders, so I'm like, Man, they're the guys that give away socks. They have what I believe is probably the best sock product in the world, and they don't even lead with that.

Jason Ross

Because the story is about their customer, and their customer is altruistic, and their customer is part of a movement, and their customer is progressive, and their customer wants to give back. And so their story is ingrained with that.

Francis Lyons

And it's also. Sorry to cut you off, but this is the way we roll. Is that no, their Bombas is helping their customer become a Yoda to the rest of society, to the homeless people, right? So it's a double down Yoda situation where they're like, Hey, buy our socks. You're

going to help these other people. So now their customers are feeling better about themselves. That's right.

Jason Ross

And one of the other things we talked about today, too, that I think makes story so important is story is what people remember. History has taught us that, media has taught us that, and they don't remember facts, they remember stories. Whoever shapes the story gets to own the narrative of history. When we're talking about building businesses in an undifferentiated market, in a competitive market, the story is the thing that makes you stand out. You both are selling iPhone covers. Why am I buying one and not the other? Well, one of them is made out of bamboo, and it's giving back to the environment, and the customer wants to identify with that aspirational aspect of that brand, and they're going to make a consumer's decision based on those principles and those values. I think that's all embedded in the story.

Ken White

We'll continue our discussion with Francis Lyons and Jason Ross in just a minute. Our podcast is brought to you by the William & Mary School of Business. When it comes to choosing an MBA program, there's much to consider: the curriculum, the fit, cost, quality, and the time it takes to earn your MBA. Well, one major component is the learning environment. For that, the William & Mary MBA program cannot be beat. For the fourth year in a row, Bloomberg Business Week has ranked the William & Mary MBA program number one in America for learning. The faculty are simply outstanding, and the students support one another inside and outside the classroom. If you're thinking about pursuing an MBA, choose a program in which learn, one that transforms you and takes you to the next level and beyond. Check out the MBA program at William & Mary at wm.edu. Now, back to our conversation with Francis Lyons and Jason Ross.

Ken White

But it's so crowded out there. I mean, there's so much noise. A good story can still cut through?

Francis Lyons

I think so, yeah. I mean, now you have to figure out how you're going to cut through, what medium? How did it use? That's always of shifting and changing. As we mentioned today, live events are really starting to come back. That's a great way to connect with people because I think, as much as we spend our lives in this digital world, we're still humans, herd animals who like that connection. So even my young kids who have grown up on their phone, man, they love going to concerts, right? More than I would have thought because they have that feeling of being part of something bigger than themselves. So it's a long. Yes, story is important, but the next, and I guess that's another class, is how do you get that out there, right? Because it's not easy. There's so many

different options. But if you're authentic, it'll land if you've got a good story at some point.

Ken White

Someone will find it somewhere, right?

Jason Ross

The fundamentals of storytelling are somewhat immutable, like the pillars of storytelling. But if you're storytelling in different. Now, you might be storytelling in a 10-second format, not a 30-second format.

Francis Lyons

But it still has a beginning, middle, and end.

Jason Ross

That's right. Or you have to establish the authenticity of the character who's trying to sell you something in that 10 seconds. Often, nowadays, it's the actual founder turning the camera around on themselves and saying, This is my story, and this is why I started this. Trust me, I'm going to help solve this problem for you. I think that is. People are looking for an emotional connection with a brand, with each other, with community. How we spend our money is an emotional act for most people. I think that brand storytelling becomes that one transformational element of, Are you going to... Is this service or is this product for me, or is it not? The quality of it, because these markets are so competitive, there's a lot of choices. Why am I choosing the one that I'm choosing? Because it has the story that makes me feel like me. I identify with it.

Ken White

It's interesting you say having the owner, the founder, out there. Maybe back in the day, that was the last thing we wanted to do because they were often awful on camera, and it was an ego thing. You're like, Oh, please don't put him on. Get someone else. But it works sometimes. Is it authenticity? Why does it work in those instances?

Francis Lyons

I mean, there's still spokespeople, but I do think this generation looks down on when you, Oh, if you're the company and you got to go hire this person, well, that person is just a sellout because they're just making money to talk about that product. So I think when you can put a face to the product of the person who founded it, I think it's just more powerful for today's day and age, because today's day and age is vlogging. We talk about ourselves, we put ourselves out there. I think that they can sniff out the spokesperson model, and it doesn't feel as authentic.

Jason Ross

Yeah. The access that the customer has now to information, again, whether that information is factual or not, there's plenty of it to wade through. The story can help shape that journey of discovery. I think that coming from a founder or a CEO is a really powerful way to tell a brand story. That's why every time you get on Delta, you see the CEO of Delta telling you, Hey, fly safe, and we'll get you home. Same with so many other brands.

Ken White

What advice would you have for a founder or a CEO who isn't really thinking much about storytelling? What should they do?

Francis Lyons

I mean, they should really start thinking about it. No, I think that they should come up with their origin story. Doing the exercise as an elevator pitch is great because it just makes you. Constraints is such an important thing, like having concerns. I remember a creative writing teacher once explaining that free verse poetry is not training your creative skills as much as something like haiku, right? And at first, I was like, Oh, I'm an artist. I should be able to write however I want. But then when you suddenly have to fit into a particular format, you get really good. So anyway, I think that they just need to think more about their origin story and then tell as many people as they can who they trust that story over and over and know that they're constantly going to be getting it better, and then just always look into themselves and make sure it's authentic. Because you too often in business, you can lose your way because you're trying to get this investment or this client, and you do have to change your pitch a little for the audience, right? But sometimes you get away from what it was all about. So I don't know that I answered your question yet.

Jason Ross

A lot of businesses, a lot of startups, especially, what would otherwise be mom and pop startups, sometimes don't have the money to do a grand brand exercise. But the tools are there. They're available. You can go through the same process in a startup that has \$100 million and one that has zero dollars and go through the same process of trying to identify your brand's mission and your story. But when you get to the end of the road, if you're lucky enough once or and sell a company, what's going to be really interesting about that story is they're going to put a value on it. It's not going to be cash flow, and it's not going to be a multiple of EBITDA, and it's not going to be top-line revenue times two. It's going to be whatever you say it is or whatever someone interprets it as being, but it is valuable. That's the one delta that is different from brand to brand to brand. It's because they got their story right. So 20% of the value of your company in an undifferentiated market, when you sell it to the incumbent, is going to be this little delta that you argue over with private equity when they come in. It's going to be like, this is

how much I've invested in story over the 10 years that I've run my business. This is why when people go out on the street, they know what my business stands for. It's because I got my story right. It has nothing to do with the numbers.

Francis Lyons

I will give you an exercise for them to do that I learned from TV and film. That is, look at your competitors. See the patterns. If you're starting this business, then do the research. See what their logline, see what their stories is, listen to podcast about them. And how I used to do that in film was if I came up with an idea for a screenplay and I knew the genre, I would then choose a couple of movies that had the same genre and were similar, and I would watch pausing and write beat by beat the number of scenes, which characters were in there, what were the ABC story lines? Because everything is patterns. That's the other thing that you learn about in so well in creativity is, yeah, the really genius creative thing is only 10 or 15% different than something that's already exists. That's the Loewy theory of innovation. So, yeah, that's what I would do. I mean, look at your competitors and don't look at them like, Oh, how are they doing it better? Or whatever. Look at them and say, Okay, what are they just doing? And what are those patterns that I can do with my company? And then you say, How can I differentiate and show that we're better?

Ken White

That's our conversation with Francis Lyons and Jason Ross, and that's it for this episode of Leadership & Business. Our podcast is brought to you by the William & Mary School of Business, home of the MBA program offered in four formats: the full-time, the part-time, the online, and the executive MBA. Check out the William & Mary MBA program at wm.edu. Thanks to our guests, Francis Lyons and Jason Ross, and thanks to you for joining us. I'm Ken White, wishing you a safe, happy, and productive week ahead.

Female Voice

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