

Lydia Inboden, Wirecard



Lydia Inboden is a Sales Executive at Wirecard, a financial services company headquartered in Germany. She participated in a Narativ storytelling workshop in March 2018.

We sat down with Lydia to learn how storytelling has changed her interactions with her primary clientele, decision-makers at major lending companies. Lydia came into our training with a natural aptitude for effective storytelling. She helped us understand the

value of our workshops for people like her who already instinctively use storytelling in sales. Some of her biggest takeaways from our training included:

- Storytelling can create dialogue, engagement, and connection with the C-suite and other decision-makers
- Narativ training can help storytellers refine their current techniques, such as when to introduce a story and how to use a storytelling arc
- Effective listening should inform the stories we tell

Q *What would you say is your number one concern as a salesperson? And does the Narativ storytelling training you participated in address that concern?*

A The relationship a salesperson has with the top of the C-level will drive all of their initiatives and momentum internally. I need to connect with the C-level on a personal level instead of through a formalized, automated process. If you eliminate the formality and actually build a connection at the top, your life and your sales cycle becomes so much easier.

That's what storytelling does. Storytelling transforms the relationship between a salesperson and their clients from a hierarchy to a conversation between friends. When I use a story, it gives the C-level a view into my humanity and helps us connect on a personal level. And then our dialogue changes: I won't be as formal and conscious that I'm talking to the CEO. I'll feel more comfortable, like I'm with a colleague or friend. And then we can share a meal; we might even start to communicate informally through text messages.

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Do you feel stories change the sales process?

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It's not unusual for salespeople to be antiquated in their ways and rely on stock, twenty-slide PowerPoint decks in their sales presentations. That's how we're taught to sell. But at a recent sales meeting, we were talking about customization of the deck. One of my product specialists told about a recent meeting he had with a well-known software company. The salespeople came in trying to sell their CRM process. They used a deck that went on for 30 minutes slide by slide by slide, not engaging in dialogue. And they didn't understand our product, so the deck wasn't even related to anything we care about. And my product specialist walked away completely disconnected from that meeting. He actually called it the "the worst meeting ever."

So how do you build a connection to stop that from happening in sales meetings? First, get rid of your PowerPoint. And secondly, use stories to connect like it's not a formal meeting. You don't want your clients to feel like they have to work for a conversation with you.

What did you know about storytelling before this training? And did your understanding of storytelling change after the training?

Before our first training, I didn't know storytelling was a sales tool. I'd never thought about using it as a tool of engagement. After the workshop, the storytelling arc gave me a way to frame a thought for more impact versus writing it off in one or two sentences. The arc gave me a way to expand on a thought to make it more meaningful and engaging. Instead of, "I went to the store yesterday and bought a pair of shoes," I can reframe that as, "I went to Neiman Marcus yesterday, and Manolo Blahniks were on sale." And then I can start engaging their questions like, "Which Neiman's did you go to? What kind of Manolos were they?" The

storytelling arc really makes a difference because that's how you engage the audience. When you frame it that way, the questions start occurring and then the dialogue just rolls.

How do you introduce a story so it feels genuine, and not orchestrated or fake?

Another thing I learned about storytelling was how to skillfully find a point of entrance for the story. When we first went through the training, I thought introducing a story would be awkward. I mean, how do you just walk in, sit in a boardroom, and start in with, "So, let me tell you this story..."? How do you introduce a story so it feels genuine, and not orchestrated or fake?

After the workshop, I found myself starting to sell a different way in order to introduce the story. Instead of talking about my company or our product in the beginning, I've begun to be more consultative in my approach by asking the client a leading question to get to my story. I'll ask, "What are your pain points for your consumers? Explain those to me." And then I get them to explain, "This is my consumer; this is who they are." And I can always find a way to relate to that. At some point in my life, how have I been that consumer? And then I'll say, "Oh yeah, I've been there before." And then I roll into my story.

I love your approach: First you listen to their pain points, and that helps you get to your story so it doesn't feel scripted. Is that your standard go-to practice now?

Yes. It makes it easier to introduce a story. When I've tried just offering it up, it hasn't been as well-received. It's like a natural conversation. If you and I are friends and we're talking, and I randomly go off on a tangent about something unrelated to our conversation, you'd say, "Wait, what's going on?" But if I connect my story to our conversation, you'll be interested because you're already interested in talking about it. We naturally want to hear

about what we're interested in. There was a client at my previous company who was a prospect at the time. Some of their executives came to an event that my company was hosting. They had been very closed off and cold in our prior encounters so I was very unsure of how to engage in a social situation.

So they're at this event and I have to introduce myself. So I told them a story about themselves, about a conversation I'd overheard at a previous event we had all attended. I was totally taking a risk at this point, because this could sound a bit creepy, but I decided to introduce it. And so we got engaged in a dialogue, and we stayed out until two or three in the morning smoking cigars together and talking. They were new people to me. They weren't the same. And we engaged on this personal level where I was telling stories about me, I was hearing stories from them, and you would never have thought this would happen knowing who these people are.

But since that night, our relationship has been completely different. Their level of connection changed dramatically. We're on a text message basis, very well-connected, even since I left my last company. And I give all of the credit to the storytelling. If I hadn't been willing to take the chance on connecting with them, that never would have happened.

Q *That sounds like a very organic approach. Do you have a similar approach for more formal meetings? Does storytelling have a place there?*

A In every meeting I'm in, I always ask what problem the target is trying to solve. Why else am I there? If you don't have a problem, I shouldn't be in your boardroom. What matters is the way I bring up or isolate the problem they're trying to solve and then

tie my personal experience into that problem. Then they will connect me with the solution: "Okay, she understands this; I understand her. We're connected." And then I bring my solution: I understand your problem, and now I'm going to solve your problem.

In a boardroom when you tell a story, do you see observable differences in your audience?

I see it in their body language: People lean in. Where before they were closed off and distracted, maybe doing something else, now they're drawn to that conversation. They are more present.

I've also noticed changes in their tones of voice. They might start very formal: "I'm John Smith, the CEO and this is what we're here to talk about." And then once I break that barrier down, he's chatting with me about his weekend plans. The rest of the meeting, the air seems lighter. Everyone relaxes.

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I've seen differences in me, too. As a salesperson, no matter how many meetings I've been in, I always feel anxious and nervous going in. When I tell a story, that all goes away. I don't feel like I'm on a sales pitch. I get more comfortable because the dialogue is relaxed. It's not as formal.

Do you feel the story and dialogue around the story is what makes that difference?

Oh absolutely. I don't think dialogue exists until you find a way to connect with a person, and the story is what gives you that connection. Storytelling bridges a gap in a historically automated process. Selling used to be door-to-door. Today we have Salesforce and other tools that make it easy to just "dial for dollars" and say the same script over and over again. So how do we remove ourselves from this automated process and make it human again?

It's about personalization. In the storytelling workshop, I could totally tell a difference in the room when one of my colleagues offered up a very personal story versus when they would say something generic like, "Once I was trying to sell to this client and it didn't go well." It's so automated. Sometimes salespeople can be like robots. But when you take that away, you can just engage with someone like you met them at a bar, or they're just a normal person at a restaurant next to you. I think we all need to do that. Let's broaden the conversation to everyone around us and be more aware of everyone's needs.

Q *I know in your industry, the sales cycle can be quite long. Does storytelling contribute to a quicker sales cycle?*

A People typically buy from people they like and want to be friends with. I don't think a salesperson will ever sell to someone who doesn't like them, no matter how amazing their solution or product is. The key to selling is that you both have the same goal and you're aligned on a personal level to achieve that goal. It's not rocket science. It's asking, are we on the same path? How can we get there together? And if you're both in sync they'll say, "Okay, let's move forward because we enjoy working together. My win is your win."

After this training, did anything change for you in terms of how you listen to others?

I'm on sales calls every day, and I'm constantly listening and asking myself, "How can I relate to this?" Listening is about finding ways that you can connect. You have to listen so that your story can evolve in a way that relates to what you're hearing.

When we did our training, we had one story. That story may not always apply to every pain point. So I try to quickly remember the process: I identify a personal experience that I can relate to what this person is talking about, and then I build my arc super quick to turn around something on the fly. And I focus on finding those details to recall them quickly and keep my story short.

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Getting comfortable with that process over and over again has made a huge difference for me. If we hadn't learned that in our training, there's no way I would've had a replicable process to tell a story in different situations.