

Storytelling Tips from Salesforce's Marc Benioff

The co-founder and CEO of the \$1 billion company offers advice on how to shape and articulate your vision for your own brand

By [Carmine Gallo](#)

[Software-as-a-service](#) pioneer and salesforce.com ([CRM](#)) co-founder and CEO Marc Benioff credits storytelling as one of the primary reasons for his company's rapid success. "Communication is probably the most essential part of my job," Benioff told me in a recent interview about his new book, *Behind the Cloud*. The book describes how salesforce went from idea to \$1 billion company in less than a decade. Whether you own a small business, run a large company, or have a great idea for The Next Big Thing, consider these seven tips from Benioff about how to shape and articulate your vision.

Commit to transparent communication. Customer relationships take work, and a big part of that work is dedicating yourself to constant communication with customers and prospects, says Benioff. "We invited them to come in and see what we were working on. We asked them to test it, and we made changes based on what they said. Having this kind of inclusive communication—sharing and listening— from the beginning set the tone for our entire company." According to Benioff, salesforce used this feedback to make fast changes—"intelligent reaction."

Make friends with reporters and bloggers. Despite a very busy schedule, Benioff responded to my interview request immediately and met my deadline. "I never treat members of the media as adversaries; they are friends of the company," says Benioff. His relationships with reporters and bloggers have been a "pivotal part" of his marketing strategy. "Journalists immediately think of me as a resource for a quote or comment because they know that I will be available to offer fresh insight and meet their deadlines." Benioff says that social media has also turned customers into content creators. "The future of communicating with customers rests in engaging with them through every possible channel: phone, e-mail, chat, Web, and social networks. Customers are discussing a company's products and brand in real time. Companies need to join the conversation."

Tell classic stories. Most reporters don't care about a tiny startup, and that's why Benioff never positioned himself as such. He told a classic David-vs.-Goliath story. "We gave the media something different. We gave them something new. We always positioned ourselves as revolutionaries. We went after the largest competitor in the industry or the industry itself. We made our story about change. We were about something new and different that was good for customers, and good for the community. We talked about the future." Although the media landscape is changing, Benioff believes there will always be a need for content. The delivery model might be changing, but exchanging and sharing stories and information remains as important as ever.

Make your own metaphors. According to Benioff, simple metaphors are a terrific way to communicate your message. "I spend a lot of time creating metaphors to explain what we do. For example, early on I explained what we did with the metaphor "salesforce.com is Amazon.com ([AMZN](#)) meets Siebel Systems." Later when we launched AppExchange we called it "the eBay ([EBAY](#)) of enterprise software." Anyone can create their own metaphors, says Benioff. "Just remember to test

them before you put them out there. Try a few and run them by customers, analysts, and people in your network to make sure they work."

Keep everyone aligned. It's not enough for one person to be on message. Everyone has to speak from the same playbook. At salesforce, Benioff made sure staffers could effectively convey what they did and what they stood for in one sentence. They created a laminated "cheat sheet," with one sentence on the front and benefits of the service on the back. Salesforce employees and partners were even provided training so they could all deliver the message effectively and consistently.

Encourage presentation skill development. Want a job at Salesforce? You'd better be a good presenter. Some candidates are required to give a presentation in addition to answering tough questions. "Presentation skills are key," says Benioff. "People who work for you represent your brand. You want them to present themselves—and represent you—in a certain way. Whether employees realize it or not, everyone in a company interfaces with customers in one way or another, and their attitude will affect the brand. That's why we work so hard to make sure we have the right people representing our brand, and that everyone is in alignment once they get here."

Display confidence. Benioff believes in dreaming big. "I believed that all software would eventually be delivered in the cloud. I had to believe in it passionately and be ready to constantly defend it." Inspiring communicators are passionate about their mission—they believe it to their core and speak with conviction. According to Benioff, you must be passionate "and a little bit crazy" to follow your own ideas and do things differently. But in the end, he says, it's worth it.

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