

- You're listening to "The HR Mixtape," your podcast with the perfect mix of practical advice, thought-provoking interviews, and stories that just hit different so that work doesn't have to feel, well, like work. Now your host, Shari Simpson.

- Joining me today is Geoffrey Klein, AKA Mr. Purple. He is a TEDx speaker, an adjunct professor, and a visual content producer and author of "The Content Beast." Create a story-driven content to connect with your audience. Geoffrey helps people and organizations communicate more effectively through the power of story. He currently serves as president and CEO of Nine Dots, a visual content company that helps businesses share their message to connect with their audience. Geoffrey, thank you so much for jumping on the podcast with me.

- Thanks, Shari, it's great to be here.

- So I wanna dive right in and hear a little bit about your journey from the film industry influencing your understanding of storytelling, especially in the context of HR.

- So I'm a movie fan from being a little kid, that was my love and so I think, and part of it was 'cause I loved stories, and I loved how they could take you places, and they could communicate in ways that were often really more dynamic than maybe dull life. And then I realized as I grew up that life's not dull either, and so there's lots of stories that happened to you that could be really exciting. But I think working in the film industry was amazing and even seeing how kind of sausage is made might turn some people off. For me, working with writers, reading some pretty bad writing, the contrast showed me what really good writing was and so I think that was also important to know what makes a good story and what doesn't make a good story. And so those things were definitely a part of my experience in Hollywood and then in terms of HR, I think about it in two senses. One is I'm a brand guy. So in terms of your brand story, what makes you as an organization tick? So from the HR, usually I recommend when people are thinking about this and they're developing their brand, they wanna do it from the top. So you got to get buy-in from the CEO and then it's usually comes into the marketing function. But HR is huge 'cause it's about your people and the story that you're sharing across the organization needs to be consistent because that will build the culture within an organization. Nike, who has been known for having a very powerful story and kind of reinforcing that, I don't think he's still there, but for years and years they had a chief storyteller officer who was really tasked with making sure that everyone understood the Nike story. And in fact, when you joined as an executive at Nike, they had a two-day storytelling onboarding as part of becoming an executive there. That's the first way, so it's about understanding how your organization ticks, reinforcing the story of what are your values? What are the things that 'cause if you believe

in Simon Sinek, 'cause I do, people buy why you do what you do more than what you do. Therefore you need to understand the why and that's kind of I think a lot of what the brand story is. What is your reason for being as an organization? Then on the flip side for HR professionals, there's the people looking for a job and so candidates need to be able to understand their story. And so from a personal branding, when you're in an interview and people are asking about a certain scale or your strength or your weakness or all those kinds of things, the best way to communicate is by telling those stories. So I recommend people who are in the HR space from a candidate's perspective, when they're thinking about the questions and answers that they may get, they should be thinking of stories where they were innovative, or stories where they were resilient, and stories where they were challenged and really thinking about those ways because that's what people are gonna remember. They're gonna remember the story, not yes, I'm a very resilient person. I know how to bounce back from stuff. But if you tell a real challenge where you really had to raise X amount of money or you were gonna get kicked out of your house or whatever the individual story would be, or you wanted to get into this program and you needed to get a certain grade on your exam, and so what was that? The struggle's on, but you didn't have much time and then your mother was sick, and all those details that will help people, that narrative form will help people remember it and connect. Not only just remember, but actually emotionally connect with you.

- You talk about in your book around this concept of story-driven content. I wonder if you could elaborate a little bit on that and how we leverage this concept to enhance employee engagement, communication, and really overall their experience in our organizations?

- I think organizations oftentimes, and HR people, and kind of across the board in corporate in quotes is about sharing information, the data. Oh, we had this much revenue, or productivity is down X, or whatever the information that you're communicating. And the science behind how people understand, and remember, and communicate shows that that's not an effective way to communicate. That alone, and that when you craft a story to share that data, that's when the real magic happens because people will get invested in the story in a way that they'll like oh, not only are, so let's say profits are down 5%. That's gonna go in one ear and out the other. Profits down 5%, and we had to, Betty, who had been here for 20 years, had to be let go. All of a sudden you're changing the story or the reverse, it don't have to be a negative story. Profits are up, and people are like woo-hoo! Profits are up because, let me give you an example of how Mary here won this big account because, and she had help from this department and that department. And so there are ways to craft the stories, so again, it's all about being able to share stories that are gonna help with people's understanding of the results. So it's the journey almost then, that's the destination. The other thing in terms of a real way

to engage employees is involve them in this story. So in marketing we talk about UGC which is user-generated content, but I think internally people can leverage that as well. So I know people have intranets and Slack channels within their organization where people can share wins and losses and the stories that make up your organization. And then as an HR department, you can showcase those stories so you can highlight employees, so people do that. That's a really good way where you're sharing the story of let me tell you about how Bob really kicked it, crushed it, and so those kinds of individual stories of success can really get people engaged. And I wanna at this point to share kind of a distinction that I think is really important and James Riballada, a friend of mine who's a fellow speaker, I have to always credit him and I wish I didn't because I had come up with a distinction, but he came up with a distinction which is the difference between credibility and relatability, and I think we're all kind of normalized to think that credibility is what we have to do. We have to prove our worth, our authority, our expertise. And yes, there's a threshold where you can't be inaccurate, wrong about things. But in terms of connecting with people, in terms of enhancing that employee engagement and that communication, it's much more important to be relatable. People wanna know that you understand fitting in their shoes and have the similar concerns, the similar ambitions, the similar dreams to them. And so by thinking about ways to communicate that are more relatable and FYI, telling a story is the way to do that, you think about credibility is usually the numbers and relatability is the story behind the numbers. So I always think it's important to think about where's the human element in all of this? I think somewhere along the line, as human beings we tell stories all the time, but for the most part we tell it in our personal lives, not in our professional lives, and I really encourage people to lean into that. And it doesn't mean you have to tell about what happened in your vacation. But if there's something valuable from that, everyone likes vacations and so what did I learn from my summer vacation is, that was almost the thing you do. In school people would say, "How was your summer vacation and what did you do?" Well, there's opportunities whether it's coming back from a holiday, whatever those breaks are. I'll give you a simple example, Thanksgiving, it's a great opportunity to collect stories from your employees about what they're grateful for at both a personal and professional level. And I think incorporating those elements is something that people shy away from and I think they're missing an opportunity to make their organization more human, and more connected, and hence more productive and all those things. It does actually impact the bottom line.

- It's amazing that we, as adults, move away from this idea of storytelling because we're taught it in high school, college. We're taking speech classes, and so we're kind of ingrained to know that it's important but we move away from it. And before I ask my next question, as you were talking about the relatability and credibility, I was thinking back to my high school speech class and we had this

assignment where we needed to come in, two minute speech, and talk about something that we've done in our life that was really brave, right? And a 14, 15-year-old, you probably don't have a ton of quote, unquote brave things you've done. So I got up and I talked about skydiving. I talked about my experience, what it felt like, how I felt, what the wind felt like, my whole two minutes, and my very last sentence of the speech I said, "This was actually the bravest thing I've done because I've never skydived before." And I mean, everybody's like, "Oh, whatever," but like it goes back to that relatability. I could see my audience so involved in what I was telling them and feeling the wind and whatever, all the things. If we can do that in our business lives and tell stories like that related to our data that we have, we're gonna be way more impactful than, like you said, just coming with here's my spreadsheet and here's the data points. So as we think about incorporating that, what are some of the mistakes that you've seen people make that they really should avoid when they think about okay, I'm gonna star telling more stories?

- I think the challenge that a lot of people have from a business perspective is, and it links back to that credibility piece, which is they feel they're almost insecure and feel the need they need to make it, that their story is worthy and they're also focused too much on themselves. So in my book and for a long time, I've been promoting the 11th commandment, know thy audience. And therefore whatever story you're telling, you should be thinking about how does this relate to the group of people I'm talking to? If you're talking to group A, it may be you focus on certain things or you select certain stories to tell. If you're talking to group B, you may change the story or change the way that you tell it. So I always tell people there's someone you don't wanna be like. You don't wanna be like Mimi, and I don't mean anyone out there named Mimi. Don't take this personally, but you don't wanna be like Mimi because guess what Mimi does? She talks about me, me, me, me, me, me, me, me, me, me, me, me, me, me, me. Not what's gonna connect with people. So you wanna think about how does what you're, it can be a personal story because those are powerful. But if you can't connect the dots to how it's gonna impact, inspire, educate, inform your audience, then it's just you chatting about yourself and people are gonna zone out. I always say, I say this to a lot of my clients. I say, "People don't care about what you can do." They're like, "What do you mean people don't care about it?" People don't care what we can do. People only care about what you can do for them. It's just human nature, and so we wanna know what's in it for me? So what is it about your story that's gonna be important to me that's gonna get me invested? And some of the ways that you were talking about with your story, being descriptive, heightening senses. Those things actually matter because there's a concept called neural coupling about how our brains work where when I tell you a story about oh, I could feel the wind against my face, your actual, the people listening, will activate in their brain the part that they would if they were feeling the wind. So they're actually vicariously living your story at a brain chemistry

perspective and that's why it's so powerful. So you wanna think about how can we engage the senses, the emotions of your audience in ways that are gonna help them integrate that and resonate with that story that you're telling?

- How do we incorporate, or rather I guess how do we take into account cultural differences? So our organization has employees across the world now and there are differences on how information's received. So what are some pointers there as we think about maybe globally, but also cultural differences just in different ethnicities?

- It's funny, I think it's the different cities 'cause I'm from Philly. So if I am in Boston, I probably won't talk about how great the Sixers or the Eagles are. It's being thoughtful is the first part. Be thoughtful about, and that's why knowing your audience is so important. So there's a great book that my mother recommended, she's a management consultant, called "Kiss, Bow, and Shake Hands" and it talks about the cultural differences in business. How some people don't want you to shake with this hand because that's not the cultural way that they do things. So being aware is the first thing that's really important. Now my wife happens to be trained in something called cultural intelligence where they actually have an assessment where they go and there's a list of I think 12 cultural values. And so once you actually understand the differences, you can then try and understand how someone might be different. I'll give you a simple example. So we talk about Zoom. We were on Zoom during COVID and some cultures didn't wanna have their cam, some people in certain cultures wouldn't put their cameras on because for them that was an invasion of privacy or some people don't wanna have direct eye contact, and then you look at just generally the ways that people communicate. So Americans on the whole, again, we're making a lot of generalizations here, are more direct in their communication. We get right to the heart of it, no BS. Whereas I lived in England for 10 years, generally speaking the British are a little more indirect, a little more polite, a little more sensitive to not say. Now, and it cuts both ways because they could be saying something to you that you take a certain way and they may not mean it that way. They may say maybe which in our culture might be yes or no. In their culture, it's pretty much a no. So understanding those cultural differences and then it all goes back again to that 11th Commandment, know the audience. So if you're dealing with a different region whether it's people in the South in America or people in the North, or California, or let alone someone in the Middle East or Australia. All those places have within them certain cultural aspects to the way that they approach work and therefore you need to be mindful that you're gonna get the best out of that relationship. And I think it's about asking questions, being open-minded, and generally having an approach of wait, wait, embracing difference in a positive way and recognizing it's not just this way. And I think Americans in particular aren't as adept at that because we're a culture of thinking we're number one. I mean, just we're

better than everybody else, and that attitude can really rub some people the wrong way. And so I think in the work culture, you need to be mindful of being inclusive of different people's experiences. And I think the thing is that you have to recognize there's value in all those different experiences, so why not look at it from that perspective rather than I know best because you don't always know best.

- Oh, my gosh, if I knew best in every scenario I'd be a billionaire, but that's clearly not the case.

- And if you're in England, don't be surprised if they offer you tea often. Just something they do.

- Noted, I don't don't have any plans to go visit England anytime soon, but I will keep that in the vault for later. One of the things that you are really strong about is visual storytelling. So how do you or how should we think about incorporating visuals into our communications? We spend a lot of time in HR thinking about the perfect way to craft a communication, both verbally and written. So what are some ways we can start incorporating visuals more?

- Yeah, I mean, let me start by saying there's a reason behind. It's not just that I like pretty pictures, but there's a lot of science behind communication, visual communication being effective, and I'll give you just a couple data points and you can think about this yourself. So visual content is received 60,000 times faster than text is in the brain. So we don't have a lot of time to communicate and so whatever the shortcut is that we can do there, and that's why I love, yeah, so it's visual is really powerful and then you add in story, and then visual stories is gonna be something that's gonna really, about 60% of us are visual learners. Some of us are auditory, and that's why again, video and animation which I do is really powerful 'cause you're tapping into multiple ways that people learn. And I think that's the real takeaway here is it's not one thing is the solution. It's about again, knowing your audience. So as an example, most people are visual learners, but some people aren't. Some people like to read stuff. So it doesn't mean that you shouldn't have, you have to know your audience and figure out what works for them. But to answer the question about okay, how do you incorporate more visuals? So I'm a huge fan of infographics. So infographics take a lot of text and they give it what we call in the market visual relief, graphic relief. So it's because we're staring at words all the time and I love words, but you're using it to connect in a way that taps into another part of their brain, and therefore will land and be digested in a way that's more likely they'll remember and that they'll understand. I mean, I always look at things like traffic signs all around the world and as you're driving, you could take the word stop off the stop sign and you'd still know exactly what to do when you got to that red octagonal shape. It's just because of the way we're oriented. A huge part of our

brain is used for visual detection, understanding, meaning, and therefore, so whenever you have an opportunity to add graphics to what you're saying, it's not about an either or. It's usually about an and. So you're gonna send out a memo, Are there some things that you can use in between the paragraphs to highlight what that section's about or what the point you're trying to make? And then the other thing is do more video. Whatever that means, I'm not saying you have to hire a professional videographer to come in, but if you think about onboarding. Having video modules rather than a big, thick book that people have to read through. I mean, you think you're taking an employee handbook and you had a video library that went through all those things that they could click through. I think you'd find that most people would watch the videos rather than read through all the stuff. It's just 'cause it's a shortcut and that's what people, the studies have shown yes, I'd rather watch a video than read the text on the whole. Therefore I think it's about giving them the options. So if you have here's our handbook and there are links to the videos for each section, they can choose. I can read it or I can go watch the video. But I do think that being able to provide people with a video or rather a visual option is gonna help 'cause they may do both and one of the things about it is that they may read it and then go wait, what was that? And then he goes well, let me go back and watch the video, and the video can then showcase what they read and then now they're learning it from a couple different ways and it's more likely to land. So I say just be mindful of it. What is the communication that you're doing? And I think animated gifs are something that I think are really fun, and they communicate a lot. Memes, as silly as they are, people get them and I'm like ah. So if you're communicating something about taking time off, make sure you put in the right requisite order for when you're gonna take PTO and you have a little animated gif of someone out of the office, gone fishing kind of thing. Humor is another way that I think is a good way to communicate and I think corporate people try and shy away from that as well. But it's about making, and I said this earlier, making things human. More human, more relatable, and the visual stories will help you get there.

- And if you're listening and you're like the idea of standing in front of a camera sounds scary, we're doing it all the time now. We're on Zoom all the time. You can do it. I promise you you can do it. If you need practice, just pick up your phone, talk to yourself. Sometimes that's the easiest way to get over some of those jitters around being recorded. Like you said though, it doesn't have to be overly produced. With all the content that we see on Instagram, and TikTok, and all those things, a lot of it is just people talking to the camera, or dancing, or teaching a concept on a whiteboard, or any of those kinds of things, using animation, right? There's a lot of tools out there for that. So you don't have to go high fidelity on this stuff, what we're talking about.

- Unless you want to. No, I'm just kidding because that's what I do.

- Unless you wanna hire someone.

- Yeah, what I usually say is two things. I say one, there may be certain circumstances where you do wanna have high production value whether you're gonna present it to a client or things like that. But for a lot of things, especially internal, you wanna be able to make sure it's genuine and authentic, much more importantly. And that's why just recording on your iPhone now. What I'd recommend, people, if you're gonna be doing this regularly, you're in a position where you have to communicate a lot and maybe you're doing it, just invest in some lighting and audio. You don't have to spend a lot of money, but lighting, I mean, I'll give you one tip that's for Zoom or anything else. Don't have light behind you. So if you're in an office and your window's behind you, that is bad. You want the light in front of you towards you. That alone, I go on these calls and I'm like you're a silhouette. But you can get a ring light and you can get very affordable audio. I mean, I'm on a AirPods. I have a fancy microphone over there and I'm just on the AirPods. So test it, see what it sounds like to people. Make sure people can understand you and this is the other tip I'd give you. Slow down 'cause what happens with most people, I talk fast because I'm excited. A lot of people talk fast 'cause they're nervous and it's really important. As a professional speaker, we talk about the power of the pause and I think people who don't like being on camera will just wanna get through it as fast as possible. But if you can train yourself and I think you can, you can train yourself through practice. You'll get better at it, but I know people who are great presenters and then you put a camera in front of them, and all of a sudden things go haywire. And I'm like, "Just ignore the camera." I'm like, "Easier said than done." But yeah, I think again, it's about just be yourself. It's much more about being yourself than being perfect.

- Geoffrey, such great tips on incorporating more storytelling. I have one last kind of off topic fun question for you. Being that you are obsessed with movies, if there was one movie that would encapsulate this ideal approach to storytelling, what would you pick and why?

- That's such a hard question and you didn't prepare me for it, but I think... Well, yeah, I'll share a couple. The first one that came to mind, so one of my favorite movies was "Shawshank Redemption" which is not necessarily a great answer for this question despite how much I loved the movie. The first movie was the first movie I worked on when I worked in Hollywood which was "The Truman Show." And the whole story is about recording someone's life 24/7 and they aren't aware that the cameras are on. So one of the reason it becomes such a big hit is because Truman is himself, he's genuine. He doesn't know that he's being recorded, and so that's I think a good film to think about. If you could be more like Truman, just a decent person being yourself without trying to worry about the cameras 'cause he's not aware of

them, I think that's a good, and I also love the idea that he's looking for adventure. So the whole movie is about him trying to get out of his life, to get beyond the island he's on, and so I use that as a metaphor for your comfort zone. So if you think about it, he's stuck and wants, he's desperately trying to grow, but he can't grow because he's stuck in the same space. So if you're looking to grow, you have to be able to step outside your comfort zone because that's where the growth happened.

- I love it, what a great answer. Geoffrey, thanks so much for taking a few minutes of your day to chat with me.

- It has been a pleasure.

- I hope you enjoyed today's episode. You can find show notes and links at thehrmixtape.com. Come back often and please subscribe, rate, and review.