



## **Your Very Best Story Case history**

By Carl Nordgren

Case histories are useful at portraying aspects of the Discovery and Creation and Performance of Your Very Best Story. This first case history was selected to represent full expressions of the power of Your Very Best Story.

### **Cellular One/Providence Journal Cellular**

Providence Journal Cellular *dba* Cellular One was one of the most successful cellular operating companies in the country, and the dominate service provider in the Southeast. Its sale to GTE in the 90's, for just under \$800 million, set a record for the highest purchase multiple in the cellular industry at the time. I had the good fortune to be the senior marketing executive at the time this operation was founded in 1985 to bring service to the Raleigh-Durham market, and a year later was promoted to CEO as the company expanded to offer cellular service to nearly twenty markets in North Carolina and South Carolina, and in Virginia and Georgia, with smaller operations in Oklahoma, Indiana, and Michigan. Our success was a result of hundreds of Cellular One employees' passionate and professional Performance of Cellular One's Very Best Story in Each Inch and Every Minute of our operations, as well as our Dramatic Amplification of our commitment to extraordinary levels of service.

## **Background**

The Cellular One Very Best Story was Discovered in the needs of our Particularly Important Audiences and Created to complete their Very Best Stories.

I was hired as the senior marketing executive as the cellular network was being built and spent nearly three months in the field calling on business and community leaders, asking them about their companies, listening to their insights about the Triangle as a business community, inviting them to share their dreams and aspirations for the future of their businesses and their community. What I heard was a sense of great pride that this market had arrived—that the growth of the Research Triangle Park had reached a critical mass with thousands employed at IBM, at Northern Telecom (now Nortel), at Glaxo and Borouhgs Wellcome (now GlaxoSmithKline) and at other major corporate facilities; that the entrepreneurial spirit was beginning to bloom; that the legacy businesses were benefiting from both and enjoying their own explosive growth. Cellular service was brand new then—it was viewed as the hot technology in a way the Internet was just a couple of years ago—and it was clear that many business and community leaders felt that the investment Providence Journal Cellular was making in building this state of the art telecommunications network was a significant milestone—some even saw it as a capstone—in the growth of the Triangle.

Our competitor in this first market was United Telephone, soon to be become Sprint Communications. As we grew into other markets we also competed with Bell South, Southwestern Bell, and GTE's wireless operations. We predicted that these companies would follow the organizational patterns they were most familiar with and run highly centralized business operations, and indeed they did.

You may not remember that when cellular was first launched the telephones were expensive—I remember selling them for \$2,000—and that they were mobile, not portable, which is to say 99% of them were installed in a vehicle, and that they were purchased for business use exclusively. A key marketing decision made at time of launch was the sales and distribution issue: would we use employed sales reps or would we recruit local businesses as dealers (Motorola Two-Way radio shops, car stereo shops, and young entrepreneurs who could be enticed to start a Cellular One dealership). The common wisdom in markets where cellular companies were approaching their first anniversary of service—Washington DC and Chicago—was that independent dealers would not work hard enough for the cellular carrier and that it was necessary to build and manage an in-house sales force.

## Cellular One's Very Best Story

Our story development was Discovery and Creation: we listened for what the Important Audiences would want to hear and we determined where and how we could create a story that would delight them. The first story line was clear: there would be great advantage in being seen as the local company, as the company that was making a serious investment in the business community and wanted to be part of the local business community, a company that was emblematic of the Triangle's coming of age. Sure our parent company was in New England, but we were confident we could become the local company by telling stories of the tangible business choices we had made and would make that would lead our Important Audiences to accepting us as the local company:

- We located all of our most senior management in the market, in Morrisville; the senior management for our competitors was in Kansas City or Dallas or Atlanta.
- While Motorola had sold their telecommunications switch to 100% of the operators who had made a purchase decision in the first phase of network construction, we were the first to buy a switch from Northern Telecom, who employed about 5,000 in the Triangle at the time, who agreed to host sessions where we could tell our story to their top and middle management, and who would run local public relations campaigns about our decision to Buy Local.
- We also swam against the tide when deciding our distribution strategy by recruiting ten dealers scattered across Raleigh, Durham, Chapel Hill, and Cary, and our recruiting of the principals and managers of these businesses included the creation of an advisory council that honored them by asking for their advice and counsel in matters beyond distribution policy. We declared we would promote them aggressively in our communications and we did. And in return they promoted us, in their places of business, in their clubs and churches, at cocktail parties.

- And we named our company Cellular One of the Triangle.

The first story line came out of our careful listening to our Particularly Important Audiences. We started telling our story while our cellular system was still being built, in a radio and newspaper campaign we titled “Excitement is Building in The Triangle”. We wanted our Important Audiences to see for themselves that important work was being done here, in their home town, and not imported from a distant office, and we wanted them to enjoy a sense of participation in it as it was occurring. We updated our Audiences weekly on such matters as cell site selection and construction—reporting on the cell site being built on top of the BB&T building in Raleigh, or the tower being built in a tobacco field outside of Durham—or about the new dealers being trained and ready to install and service phones, and about hiring our customer service staff and how they are prepared to serve the Triangle area exclusively.

We enhanced our story telling of our local commitment with a strong marketing investment in the areas’ three major universities. We understood from the first years’ sales in other markets that the majority of lead adopters would be business owners, especially in the real estate professions and the contractor trades. We knew from our Discovery process that it was almost a certainty that these men and women would have a powerful allegiance to one of the athletic teams of UNC, NC State, or Duke. So we decided we would not only invest the great majority of our marketing dollars within the athletic programs of these three schools, further anchoring us within the community, but we would engage in the types of personalized communications campaigning that would represent a local sensibility. We created spots with Jim Valvano, Dick Sheridan, and Mike Krzyzewski that captured the time and the place, the personalities and the reputations our Audiences were passionate about. (And for you UNC fans, we attempted to engage Coach Smith in similar spots and he respectfully declined.)

For instance, we produced the first TV spot Coach K ever did, a spot we cut a few days before a Duke vs. UNC basketball game. We asked Coach K to wear the same clothes he would wear at the game, and filmed a scene that captured Coach K leaving the locker room to draw the winning name in the ‘Excitement is Building in Triangle Sweepstakes’ we were running at the time. We bought a 30 second spot during the half time of that Sunday afternoon game to run the spot—the on-air professional talent thanked Coach K for his help and wished him luck in the second half—and the next day we received over a hundred phone calls asking us how we were able to get Coach K to leave the locker at half time of this game that had monumental importance to the local community. We created a moment of Dramatic Amplification, a Story the community talked about and our employees were very proud of.

## **Internal Marketing of Cellular One's Very Best Story**

But with all our Creative Story telling to external Audiences, the most important place the Cellular One Very Best Story was being told was within the organization. By the time I took on the CEO's role after a year of leading the market campaigning, I had already seen a couple of examples of how telling Our Very Best Story internally so our employees would Perform it was vital to the great success we were steadily building.

The best example might be how we viewed our dealers and how the stories we told ourselves about dealers affected that view and defined our service Performance. At the time we started in the Triangle the cellular industry had such minimal success with dealer sales that the trade magazines were writing articles labeling dealers as 'necessary evils'. We took a different approach. As I was out recruiting dealers I explained that I understood that most businesses in virtually all industries sign up dealers so that the dealers can work for them. But my goal...and as I said this to a dealer I was recruiting I unbuttoned and began rolling up my shirt sleeves...my goal, I told them, was to recruit dealers so I could roll up my sleeves and go to work for them and their success. That we knew that the only way we would achieve outstanding support from them is if we delivered outstanding support to them. That was our standard, and we asked them to hold us to it. And when we delivered, we could only expect outstanding support from them.

The first time a dealer heard me say this he was intrigued but of course not convinced. When I returned and repeated this claim they were interested, and looking for evidence it might be true, and saw that evidence in the marketing support programs we showed them we were creating for them. And when we moved into operations and they called on my employees to Perform a support task and found that roll up the sleeves and work for them attitude informed our service Performances, they did what I expected them to do: they became very loyal and worked hard for someone working hard for them.

And they did find that that service attitude, for as I led the recruiting of employees who would serve our dealers, I made sure that during the interview process all prospective employees were told the story of how I would roll up my sleeves and promise to go to work for our dealers, and every meeting we had discussing our dealer market campaigning, our dealer training, our dealer policies, our dealer activities, I began the session by rolling up my sleeves and asking what we were going to do in this meeting that would result in our dealers finding new evidence we were working hard for their success.

A parallel Story line we were working on with Internal Market Campaigning was our service commitment to customers. We were confident our local CSR staff could be demonstrably better at educating first time customers. The first month we were on line we had lunch meetings every day with our CSR's and invited them to talk about the questions that were arising and to educate us on how they were handling them. On a rotating basis we invited members of the engineering and technical teams to hear about system problems, members of the finance and accounting teams to hear about billing concerns, and senior executives to assure CSR's that their individual efforts in solving customer complaints were making them the most valued members of our team. We developed a Quality, Service, Value stamp and gave one to every CSR and invited them to stamp memos or reports or any other physical representation of a job well done.

We saw how our pre-launch ads that had reported on our progress building our local company could evolve into ads that educated Important Audiences about the topics that were most frequently arising as customer problems, and we highlighted them and showed how our CSR's were either solving those concerns themselves, or calling on others to assist them. With our CSR's permission, we began using the QSV stamp in those ads as a visual icon of our local company's commitment to great service.

## **The next chapter of Cellular One's Very Best Story**

One of the powerful aspects of Story is that it must continue to grow, it has its own momentum. So we needed a next chapter of the Story of Cellular One being the local company after the first 12 months or so of operations. It came when we found we had harvested the low lying fruit, the pent up demand, the early adopters, and our continued careful listening to the market indicated the next wave of likely adopters had an appreciation for the increase in productivity a cellular phone would provide but there was also concern about how well the technology would work, and whether mastering it would be frustrating.

Keep in mind that this was the late 80's. No one had laptops in their briefcases and only assistants had PC's on their desks; you were told no more often than yes when you asked if you could fax something to a customer's place of business; voice mail was being experimented with by the more progressive companies. There was not yet the general appreciation for technology as a productivity tool and in fact our research showed the next wave of adopters had very high levels of technophobia. We decided the next chapter of our story would be one the local leader, Cellular One, was tee'd up to make: we would be the Quality, Service, and Value leader, and our promise to deliver a technology that would be of the highest quality and the greatest value to our local community was so important to us, we would Guarantee it. But to do so, we needed to make sure we had the strong support of our folks, that the service commitment was strong, was our compass. So the three part Guarantee was created over the course of two lunch sessions attended by all of our CSR's and representatives of all other departments.

**Our Quality Guarantee:** The cellular network we have designed and built and maintain is of such excellent Quality, we Guarantee it. If you drop a call—a not infrequent problem in the first years of cellular service—or even if the static is so poor you can't conduct a conversation—in the days of analog service, also a frequent occurrence—

simply call our local CSR's, give us the number you were speaking to, and we will not charge you for that call. Of course other cellular companies would also credit a customer's complaint, but we understood there was a much more powerful Story in declaring our promise of our delivery of Quality.

**Our Service Guarantee:** Here, the concern was not a legitimate one, but many prospects shared it. They were concerned this cellular phone would be another piece of consumer electronics that would fail to work for them. We assured our Important Audiences that the phones we selected were easy to operate and highly reliable, and Guaranteed that if the phone breaks all they have to do is take it to a local Cellular One dealer and we will either repair it in ten minutes or install a new one at no cost to the customer.

**Our Value Guarantee:** As is true today, there were a range of price plans available. But in the early days of cellular there was little common knowledge about how much cellular airtime one might use and therefore which plan would be most cost efficient. Our Value Guarantee promised customers that if in the first six months of service they found their usage would have more efficiently been billed on an alternative plan, we would switch them over to that plan, and apply the change retroactively.

## **The Transformative Results of Cellular One's Very Best Story**

When Providence Journal Cellular was sold to GTE, their due diligence uncovered findings so startling they couldn't believe them, because the findings challenged everything they believed about telecom success. GTE was a company certain that success in wireless communications, in every one of their telecommunications businesses for that matter, was driven by designing and building and maintaining top quality networks. They had a very sophisticated network quality matrix they used to grade out all of the networks they had built in the dozens of markets they operated, and had a corporate policy that no system's quality would perform below an A-. When they applied that matrix to our networks, we achieved an average quality grade of C+. What stunned them was that the customer perception research they did showed our customers perceptions of Cellular One system quality was measurably higher than the customer perceptions of GTE quality—I understood that the great work our CSR's did in responding to customer problems was the determining factor in customers' over all sense of service quality—and that our average market share of 63% (wireless was a two horse race at the time) was almost ten points higher than their average share, and that our market penetration was a good 15% ahead on a comparable market basis. They did not understand the transformative power of Your Very Best Story, and in fact they denied it. My hope for you is that your competition denies it as well, and my invitation to you is that we work together to Discover and Create and Perform Your Very Best Story, to accomplish Dramatic Results.

**We would look forward to sharing other examples of how Your Very Best Story is the best marketing practice, including Curtiss Wright, the best business story in the history of American enterprise, and Ayuda, the service company created for Mexican immigrant heroes.**