

Thoughts to Help You Succeed as a Professional Storyteller

by Carol McCormick

Clarify Your Purpose

- Craft a Mission Statement. For example: “I will make a difference in the world through telling stories. I will nurture hope, empathy, creativity, community, and joy.”
- Follow your unique path. Diverse thinking leads to fresh ideas. Differences can be your superpower. Author Lynda Gratton: “Simply following the herd will not work. In a way that past generations simply didn’t have to do, each one of us needs to think about how we construct our life so it reflects our identity and values.”

Develop Your Craft

- Continually build your repertoire and skill. Have stories for different holidays, seasons, topics, and audiences. Think how you can re-purpose a story for different occasions. Hunt for stories in libraries, bookstores, online, and from other storytellers. Have a Story Idea Journal for recording program topics and story plots.
- Beware of perfectionism. In Tina Fey’s first year at Saturday Night Live as she was rushing to finish a skit, Lorne Michaels told her to wrap it up. She protested, “But it’s not ready!” Lorne laughed and said, “Tina, the show doesn’t go on because it’s ready. It goes on because it’s 11:30.” Set a birth time for your projects. Once you’ve birthed it, you can continue perfecting it.

Attend to Business

- Telling stories is just a small part of the business. You will wear many hats -- secretary, researcher, bookkeeper, marketer, networker, public relations specialist.
- Keep detailed records. What, where, when, for whom you worked and what you were paid. This makes filing taxes and looking for references or repeat business much easier.
- Invest in your business. Maintain a library of craft and story books. Buy a file cabinet, desk, portable sound system, brand clothing -- hats, vests, scarves, jewelry -- props to grab attention. Have a website, Facebook page, business cards, Zoom subscription. Improve skills by attending other tellers’ workshops and performances.
- Have flexible pricing. Avoid publishing fees on the web. When a job doesn’t appeal to you, price it exorbitantly high. If you land that gig, you’ll feel good about the money you are making, and the high fee will balance out the low pay you accept from nonprofits or volunteer jobs.
- Diplomatically handle requests for volunteer storytelling. Say something like “I love being able to help. However, my professional services are how I earn my living. I’m happy to give you a nonprofit discount or recommend someone who can help you.” If you do volunteer, make sure the client generates an audience and provides a reference.

- Get timely payment. Normally you're paid after delivering the work. If a large corporation or organization uses your services as an interest-free loan, send an overdue invoice, call, send emails. You might have to send an invoice with a late payment fee added to get them to pay their original invoice.

Grow Your Creativity

- Develop new programs and workshops. Respond to market changes, contemporary issues, and customer requests.
- Admit and learn from your mistakes, both in your craft and your business. Rather than ignoring mistakes in both your craft or business, focus on Next Time. Dig deeper to find root causes or systemic issues. Mistakes can spark innovation. When you mess up, respond with humor and curiosity.
- Practice self-compassion. This increases resilience, reduces anxiety, and improves performance. Being human, you'll have fluctuating energy and imperfect days. Respond to those with understanding rather than shaming. That shift can change not just how you feel, but the work you make. Give yourself little rewards for the things you've done well.
- Speak to yourself kindly. Is your self-talk harsh? Most of us would never speak to a friend the way we speak to ourselves when something goes wrong. When you stop criticizing yourself, you have more room to experiment, fail forward, and grow.
- Go with the flow. Tune into your energy levels. Creativity doesn't have to happen on a strict schedule. Rest is part of the creative process. Some of your best ideas will surface when you stop pushing.
- Reframe what success means. Resist bemoaning what hasn't happened or what you haven't accomplished. In messy, slow, pressured, uncertain times, remember that creativity is sustained long-term by kindness, not pressure.

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About the Author- Carol McCormick has been a professional storyteller for over 35 years. Through her engaging programs, keynotes, and workshops she stretches peoples' minds, offers new perspectives, encourages laughter, and sparks imagination. For Carol, storytelling is more than performance. She uses it to build community, grow empathy, provoke creativity, encourage change, and guide transformation. Carol believes that storytelling can help grow a more peaceful and compassionate world. www.carolmccormick.net