

BETTER EXPERIENCES BY DESIGN

Unlocking Hidden Growth Through Strategic Storytelling with Stephen Steers

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Susan Quinn: I'm thrilled about today's conversation because we're joined by someone who blends business strategy with real human insight. Steven Steers is a consultant, keynote speaker, but he's also a master storyteller who has helped over 750 companies from 30 countries, including teams like Google and Nike, helping them communicate their value and how to grow smarter. What I love about Steven's approach is that he shines a light on the opportunities we often miss, especially the ones hiding inside the clients we already know and serve. He shows how a great story and a real conversation can reveal new needs and open the door to growth that feels natural and authentic. Let's jump in.

Stephen, welcome to Better Experiences by Design.

Stephen: It's awesome to be here with you, Susan. Thank you so much for having me.

Susan Quinn: Well, I want to give our listeners a little bit of your background because I was quite impressed and then we can get into the subject that caught my attention when I heard you speak recently. So, let's start there, your background.

Stephen: Yeah. Thank you for having the question. So, I'm a sales consultant by trade. I've been in the sales profession for over a decade, and I started in this side of things because I wanted to be the help that I didn't have. Started out selling SASS for very early-stage companies. Didn't have much support, kind of clawed my way into closing some deals, and then I realized it doesn't have to be this way. And so, when I start working with founders, I've realized as well that who you are, the reason you started your company and those stories around that are some of the most compelling things that actually helped me to close deals which I think is an underutilized superpower that folks in any business are not taking enough advantage of, especially in a strange market like we're in today. That led me to write a book called *Superpower Storytelling*, of which I lecture on occasion, and my work now is principally concentrating and helping founders and teams to use the stories that they have to close more deals, unlock hidden revenue that they didn't know they had, and just generally make sales, hopefully, a little more fun.

Susan Quinn: So, I love that terminology, superpower storytelling, because as marketing professionals, it really does come down to the power of the written word, the spoken word, how we can craft stories, and I heard you speak several months ago and was fascinated. In fact, I think I came up to you afterwards and said, you are far and away the best speaker that I've heard over these several days, [laughter] and I was very serious.

Stephen: [Laughs]

Susan Quinn: And what caught my attention was around this notion. You can help us find 50 to 100K that's sitting right there for the taking with your existing clients. So, can we start there because that's what you talked to our group about, and I think everyone would like to grab an extra hundred K.

Stephen: Yeah, absolutely. So, there's a series of frameworks that I walk people through and they're generally quite simple, but the key piece here is you spend all this time, all this marketing dollars to get people in the door to pay attention to a message you have. And sometimes, it works super well and you win them and you sell your standardized service to them, but how many times have you been in a conversation with a current client and you're mentioning like, oh, this is a thing we helped another client with just casually in passing, and they're like, I didn't know you did that. Wait, can you do that for me? Now it might not happen every single time, but I'm willing to bet any person listening, whatever industry you're in, whatever service or product you provide, there's something that you do that your clients don't know that you can do for them to increase their outcomes.

So, when we pull back the opaqueness of business. There's generally four reasons that any business is going to buy from you. The first is you're going to help them to make more money, the second is you're going to save money, the third is you're going to increase their efficiency, and the fourth is you're going to mitigate their risk. Now, whatever you sell, it probably does a couple of those or there's some story you can tell around how you've done something like that for somebody in the past. So, as long as we keep that as the main thesis, If you're currently helping them to make more money with your marketing campaigns, maybe you've uncovered a new framework to decrease their ad spend, but get a higher return on their ad spend. That's a conversation most people are going to want to have.

So, it starts with solving a real problem that is measurable for your people, so once we have that as the framework, it's all about how we build out a sequence and train your staff on how to ask appropriate questions to your client to create a space where it's natural for you to have a conversation about what else it is that you do and what other additional outcomes you can help that client to get to. And all this is based on you've already built the trust; they've already signed the first contract. They don't really want to go look for somebody else. They want someone who's going to be a real partner to them and help them see what they haven't seen before.

Susan Quinn: Well, and I love the four areas. That's what every company needs, so if you can be that strategic partner in one, two, three, all of them, then you become, this overused word, but that trusted partner, trusted advisor to them, and, you know, a lot of it too is making them feel understood or that you are anticipating their needs and various things versus just the task at hand or the service that you're doing.

So, let's dig into that a little bit more. How do you guide companies to incorporate that thought process. Because it's a mindset versus selling that we are putting product A and B in for you to selling the heart and soul of what you're doing strategically.

Stephen: Yeah, and this is where every company has its own little bit of nuance, so I'll speak in as general terms as possible. Let's say in your business, in the marketing side of things, we want to build out an ascension model. We could think of this as far or as high up the funnel as how do we generate a lead that wants to talk with us? Right? If you think about this, as far as somebody doesn't know me, how do I get them to know, like, and trust me enough to get on the phone so we can have a conversation.

Once we've crossed that chasm and we've sold something to somebody, what is our ascension model within our business for additional products, additional services, additional value, and value over a longer time? So, as an example, let's say every engagement we start with has some type of paid audit, right? That's the first step. From the audit, we do our first campaign, that's three to six

months or however long it is, which has a very specific outcome. Once we are in that specific first project, what is the second project or second deliverable that we would offer, what time period, and so on and so forth down the line for the life cycle of an average client.

Once we've identified all of those inflection points, it starts with scheduling regular check-ins with your client. Again, normal, if you're doing anything that's like marketing or sales, it's going to be dashboards and you're constantly telling people about the performance. Once we have these regular check-ins, what I train people to do is ask a series of questions. Again, they're not salesy. They're not pushy. They're really value-added questions. And again, this is the key is you have to actually care about your client if this is going to work well, and you have to be regularly in front of them and hopefully be getting them good results to where they're going to trust you that you have identified other things.

So, once we've trained teams, we help them ask the right questions, and then through those regular check-ins, it becomes much more natural to say, hey, here's something else I noticed based on the conversation we had. We have some other things that we do here. I think it might be worth a discussion. Let me know if we can schedule some time.

The important metric here is about, you have about a 70% higher chance to get business from people you already do business with versus a 25 to maybe 40% chance to get business from people you don't know yet. I'm not saying don't go for people you don't know. I want you to have all the business in the world, but you already did the hard part of signing a contract with that client. It's up to you and the way you offer your products and services to teach somebody else what the next step is and frame that next step with good storytelling, good outcomes, and then training your people on how to unlock what the next step is that they want, and then teach them how it relates to what your ascension model is for the life cycle of your customer. So that's the general framework around it.

Susan Quinn: You know, you gave that 70-30 metric. We look, just for our own company, exactly that percentage. I'm curious, so let's say for companies that look at it as existing client revenue versus new, do you think there are two different groups that should be looking at that? In other words, is it a sales team that's trying to do both or it's the people who are working on projects that learn for existing clients how to have that value-add conversation, and then for brand-new clients, it's more of that beginning pitch and the presentation. So do you see it as two separate teams or...?

Stephen: Yes, and. I'm going to use the improv thing, yes, and. So, I firmly believe that—for example, we talked about marketing is like, you understand, I got leverage storytelling—marketing attracts people's attention and we need to continue that story with them when they get on a sales call. And when you get into a deeper call, strategy call or whatever you call it, the secondary call where you give a little bit more specifics around how you work or what your plan will be to work with them, that's when we want to share that ascension model.

So, we talk about, hey, here's where you are based on our conversation. This is the section you're in. These are the typical needs and the, things we offer to help folks in your specific place in the future. Once we've achieved these types of metrics, here's typically what people experience and what they have and how we've also addressed these problems. And this has done well by a salesperson. You've planted the seed for what else you can do for deeper conversations and to show a person that, Hey, we're going to get you to this point. And when you get to this point, here's how we've already addressed dealing with it.

Once we've crossed the line where we signed a contract and we're embedded and working together, we've already seeded that conversation for the ascension, for what happens, how else we can help you, and what else you're doing, so during those check-ins, it's not new information that we have this other thing that you could fit for, it's us offering additional value and reminding them

of the value we had at the very beginning and continuing that story using their business as the framework.

Susan Quinn: You use storytelling as part of this tool. So yeah, you're uncovering the unmet needs, reframing it as a value add, but are you guiding sales teams of how to do that with storytelling? Am I understanding that correctly?

Stephen: Yes, in a way. So, when but people are like, oh, storytelling, like, I'm not Steve Jobs. I don't tell great stories. Like, I don't have this skill. And it's like, well, maybe, but here's the way I want people to think about it. It's not that you need to be an incredible orator and know how to tell all these intricate details of things. It's what is the context that people need to hear to understand themselves better. So, it's about framing in my mind that, oh, you've addressed a problem like this before, so social proof.

Susan Quinn: Mm-hmm.

Stephen: And I want to see myself as someone who gets in that result. So, the whole reason we tell a story is to better help the listener, the audience, the prospect, in this case, tell their own story. You're just filling in the social proof and the gap of humanizing the methodologies that you use, the products or services that you sell, to show that it's not just, hey, buy this widget, you need services. It's, hey, actually, when I worked with Susan and Tami and the team, here were the real problems that they had. These were their strong concerns. And in taking that in, we ran that through our methodology, we built out this very specific plan for them, and once we implemented that plan, here's the results we got, and when we work with other marketing firms like yours, this is what we expect that we could get.

So again, you can make it more flowery or anything else. If you have the style or the panache to do that, that's fine. But it's more about understanding what context can we apply who we are to those four metrics of make money, save money, increase efficiency, and mitigate risk with real live examples that are human. And that is going to help people lower that cortisol. Cortisol is a chemical that people have in sales that gives them resistance. It's like, oh, this person is trying to sell to me. We want them to sell themselves, and stories are one of the many methods that can help people sell themselves because you're not pushing the results. You're mentioning the results and have a referenceable case study to leverage so that they can check and convince themselves that you're the right fit.

Susan Quinn: I want to zero in on existing customers because, if that's 70% ideally of where your revenue could be coming from—and I know every company is different, you've got to create your own metrics on that—but when you are deep working with a client, you may not be thinking about this value add or how are we helping to mitigate risk? Is there a process that needs to be added internally of, okay, we're now at this milestone on a project where are we in helping craft the value add for this client? I mean, are there any thoughts there of what companies can do to make it part of the process of serving their clients better?

Stephen: Yeah, I think there's a ton of ways. I think the first piece is depending on how the listener's company structures in engagement, there should be some very regular intervals that you have conversations with clients, period.

I was talking with a one of my clients yesterday and they turn over their campaigns and don't talk to the people at all after. And they're like, oh, we, you know, we don't really do much upselling here, and then when we unpacked everything, they had a whole bunch of additional services that they can offer that those clients would need. And so, I say that all to say, it comes back to our ascension model and those regular check-ins. The regular check-ins allow you to not feel salesy and gross. I don't like salesiness. I think it's abhorrent. I think it's a huge demerit to the profession of sales

because we're all selling, we're in business. And there's been some really nasty people who've sullied the profession by doing what they do, and I don't want to be one of those. And I want to make sure that anybody I work with isn't one of those people as well.

And how do we do that? One of the easiest ways is to create a scaffolding of regular conversations to where people have already agreed to talk with us. And that's when we can have a deeper conversation that doesn't feel like we're going to push some product or service on them.

So, I say that to say, if your accounts team is checking in and asking good questions, we then have another, maybe it's weekly meet with your client. You'd say, hey, after our last meeting, we took this internally. We discussed a couple of other things about this. We have some relevant ideas on how we could solve this particular problem for you. Do I have your permission to share more?

So, when you ask, is there a policy or is there a framework or a process, you need to have regular check-ins with your client so they don't feel like you're just trying to pitch up something. It needs to come from a genuine place, genuine character, and genuine questions that you've asked, and they've answered, and you're responding to that answer they have with a potential solution or additional offer.

Susan Quinn: So, the cadence feels like something you need to do authentically, and people may start to pick up, you know, every few weeks there's always this same approach with a story, let me sell you more. People will figure that out quickly, but what are the most common mistakes that leaders make, that account people make, that project supervisors, you know, because each group is going to have a different front person when they try to expand with current clients. I'd love to dig there.

Stephen: Just what you said right there. It's like, oh, every week they're going to catch on to my telling a story, doing a thing. That's the absolute wrong way to do it, and thank you for pointing that out, Susan. Have you heard, I think you know Gary Vaynerchuk, right?

Susan Quinn: Yes.

Stephen: So, he has a book. One of the first books I read from him is *Jab, Jab, Right Hook*, right? Which is basically about add value, add value, make an ask. It's all about sequencing of moves. So, if every check-in you're making an offer, you're doing it wrong. If your engagement is three months long, right, just as a quick, easy thing, three months, we're going to have our first check-in for month one. We're going to have a midway point, and maybe we'll have an end of agreement, week before it ends.

So, by the midway point in almost any engagement, you probably have identified a couple of trends, you've gotten some quick wins in, and you're starting to see where things are generally going to go. If you've scheduled your midway check-in, what you would then do is go over what's happening, ask some really pointed questions to make sure that the back half of the agreement is going to be fulfilled as they want, what you're trending towards, et cetera, and then you ask these very pointed questions that are going to set you up to have a conversation about whatever upsell or cross-sell you offer. So we have that midway point after we've gone through that, you can send another quick email to a client and say something along the lines of, hey, we've gone over everything that we've talked about and we have some additional ideas. Let me know if we can hop in and have a quick conversation. And that's when you would then have that.

You don't want to do that every quarter. You want to be genuine about it and just make sure you're asking regular questions that give you a chance to say, hey, we really sat down and went over this.

Susan Quinn: I love that midpoint check-in for clients that we work with that have long cycles, and a lot of this is in the AEC industry where we do a fair amount of work, you know, it could be a year and a half project. You definitely have to start strong, so I think teams do a good job with that. If you don't have a strong closeout of that project, they're going to remember that for sure.

Stephen: Yep.

Susan Quinn: At midpoint, and we have said to clients over the years that, you know, that is a good time to check in, but what sparked an idea is that you really need to do that with more intention, perhaps, because if you can uncover that something may be going wrong that you may not have been aware of, I mean, that's the time to correct it so that you do have a strong ending.

Stephen: So, another mistake people make is that it's not a company-wide thing.

Susan Quinn: Mm.

Stephen: So, for example, we know salespeople are going to ask questions, we hope our accounts team is going to ask questions, but what about the people who do fulfillment? So, the people who actually handle the marketing metrics or the dashboards. Those folks are brilliant, that's why they're on our team, but they also need to be trained to ask questions. Like here's your script, so again, you're going to get on the call with this client, here's all the backstory on all of them, here's what they want to learn, when you're on the phone with any of our clients, make sure to ask questions around these three themes, everybody.

So that insight might not come from an accounts meeting. It could come from someone who's billing the campaigns or who's sitting inside of the social media campaign and creating the posts, and they're asking the right pointed question that unlocks the thing. Everybody on the team is a salesperson if they're at the company. Point blank period. Everyone needs to be trained on how to talk to a client to ask questions and unlock additional opportunities. So that's a huge, huge mistake people make.

Second thing is incentivize people to do that because most people are like I'm not a salesperson, I don't want to ask questions, and when it's like, hey, if you unlock a new opportunity, there's commission for you. So incentivized.

Susan Quinn: Absolutely.

Stephen: And your weekly meetings with all of your teams, have a part of your meeting be, did anybody hear anything interesting from a client about a pattern and any insights? Just make it a common thing that everybody in the company is sharing what they hear from clients. It could be a five-minute part of your 30-minute meeting or hour-long meeting, but just give people the chance to say, oh, I heard this. I'm thinking about this.

Why this? First, it gives your team ownership over potential outcomes across the entire company. Second, it creates a mood of 'I'm influencing something' from your employees, right? They feel like they're more empowered. And then thirdly, you're going to learn new patterns you didn't hear that you can then create additional offers to solve for. So, it's not just your standard things you already have on the shelf that you give to people. There may be this brand new side of marketing or new platform that we haven't done anything with that we can start to build out a strategy for. So, it needs to be a culture of questions and a culture of storytelling and a culture of asking things in order to increase.

So those would be the two. The third one is, as a leader, it needs to start with you.

Susan Quinn: Yeah.

Stephen: It needs to start with me. It needs to start with us. As in when you open the meeting, give examples of how you've done that to folks. Thank people. Right, right. Like be a present person that people want to produce at a high level for, and again, incentivize those things and I think you'll generally be off to the races.

Susan Quinn: Good reminder. So as leaders, you've got to show that culture of storytelling [laughs].

Stephen: Mm-hmm.

Susan Quinn: Number one, you need to emulate it. Your top leaders need to do that, certainly internally, to keep your team engaged. Keeping teams, it's a lot harder today than it was, as they say, back in the day. But then company-wide, everyone, anyone who has even a small piece that is engaged with that client, you talk about fulfillment, the person sending invoices, whatever it may be, but to teach a culture of better questions would be a culture of storytelling. Would that just be a continuation of the training? And how do you know if you have a culture of storytelling?

Stephen: Great question. I think a culture of storytelling is making sure everybody knows those three things in the company, the mission of the company, the vision of the company and the milestones, right? It shouldn't just be a salesperson that can say, oh, here's how we help the client. The fulfillment person should know the person who sends invoices, if it makes sense, should know everybody should know why we're here and what we're all working towards together, and that should be—I don't want to say drilled into people, but it should be part of the scaffolding of the culture of the company. So, for example—I'm spit balling here, Susan, so forgive me—if we have a team meeting and a company meeting, the leader should open with some type of story. And also, you could say, hey, if anybody has a great story of something that they saw from a client this week, we want to reserve time for that at this point, and we want to celebrate it.

So, you start to build people like, oh, I want to get this story, and I want everybody to hear, I want everyone to laugh, I want everyone to feel excited. And when I say reward, I don't just mean dollars, right? Dollars are cool. We love them. I want as many of them as I can have. But, what most people really, really, really want and don't get and why they leave jobs is they don't get recognition.

Susan Quinn: Mm-hmm.

Stephen: So, this is a simple, smaller way to invite people to be recognized in a way. Again, some people won't want to do it and that's okay, but you want to put that into the framework of how you manage your team to reward folks for sharing stories, having good conversations with people and reporting their findings that they have from those meetings with clients. And I think that is a real culture that people are going to stay for, and that also differentiates you in the market because most people don't do stuff like that.

Susan Quinn: You know, I think by nature we identify roles and we want people to stay in their lane, but I love this idea that we're all capable of storytelling. We're all capable of gathering intel of how we can serve that client with more value by asking better questions. And that's an epiphany. I've heard you speak, we've had several conversations, and the beauty is that you don't just hear one podcast and it's like, oh, I know how to do it. It is a process, and you have to, as you say, it starts with leadership, that this is how we are going to look at being value added in every way for every part of our company. Did I summarize that correctly? Would you change anything?

Stephen: You nailed it. You nailed it.

Susan Quinn: Well, I love learning from talented people, and you do your storytelling so well, and it is a powerful tool. You know Circle S has an S in the middle and it stands for a lot of S's, but one of them 25 years ago when we started the company was around the power of storytelling. So, I'm glad 25 years later, it still is evergreen. That is not going away.

Stephen: Definitely is not, not anytime soon anyway.

Susan Quinn: Stephen, we are coming at the end of our time together. I know we could spend a whole lot more time together, but one of the questions I always ask: What do you do to keep bettering your best and sharpening your pencil to serve your clients better?

Stephen: Love the question. I just stay consistent. I don't remember who says it or whatever, but it's always like a half of success is showing up, right? [Laughs] 50 plus percent. And so, I'm a big routine guy. Like, there's certain things I do every single day without fail, and that keeps my mind sharp, keeps me calm, and allows me to explore places where I could do my best work, even if it's getting tough or the market's not the way I want. So, that would be absolutely it. Just stay consistent, keep doing the inputs, and the lacking indicators of dollars or other opportunities generally show up at the right time.

Susan Quinn: I love it.

Stephen: Thank you again for having me, Susan. It's a pleasure to be here with you today.

Susan Quinn: Well, I hope to get you back soon and let's keep sharing good information. Thank you, Stephen.

Stephen: Promise.