The Karaoke Effect: How to Perfect Your Startup's Story

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When I started Tidemark, I began with a marvelous vision for the company. In my mind, the story's intricate and powerful details fit together like a Beethoven symphony, but when I told the story to investors I sounded like a tone-deaf drunk in a karaoke bar. What the hell happened?

> Telling your story isn't just about marketing. It's about leadership. Great people will only want to pursue great visions.

It turns out that coming up with the story is entirely different than articulating the story. In fact, articulating the story can be more time consuming and difficult than inventing it in the first place.

Despite being incredibly hard, as a founder there is perhaps nothing more important than being able to convey the story arc of your vision, of what you are after and why it matters. Pitch perfect.

Often we have to do so with a large array and diverse audience. Why should customers care about what you are offering? Are you a "must-have" or a nicer way to do something that's already done? How are you different? Why are you after this?

In Woody Allen's excellent *To Rome with Love*, Giancarlo, a proud father whose day job is that of a mortician, sings in the shower and Jerry, a retired — and critically reviled — opera director

played by Allen himself, feels inspired to bring Giancarlo's gift to the public. Jerry convinces a reluctant Giancarlo to audition in front of a room of opera bigwigs, but Giancarlo performs poorly in this setting.

What Jerry realizes is that Giancarlo's talent is tied to the comfort and freedom he feels in the shower and in a particularly funny and smart series of scenes, Jerry and Giancarlo decide to stage the opera Pagliacci, with an incongruous shower present in all scenes. Giancarlo receives rave reviews. We are all, of course, perfect singing in the car by ourselves.

Short of bringing the shower with us every time we talk about what we are building, what are some of the things that can help remove the karaoke effect?

Here are some things that I found helpful:

1. **Embrace solitude and precision**. In a recent New York Times interview, Jerry Seinfeld talks about his creative process seeking perfection. He will nurse a single joke for years, amending, abridging and reworking it incrementally, to get the thing just so.
2. **Freedom to pursue the improbable** removes the uncomfortable feeling that nobody gets your story. As Aaron Levie the CEO and cofounder of Box passionately talks about in Be on a mission that doesn't suck, working on something that is ambitious, improbable, and fundamentally thrilling will keep you cranking day after day, constantly refining and seeking what matters.
3. **Be quotable**. Strive for a clear, concise and quotable foundational story as the glue that holds and inspires the management team, the various teams inside the company and your early customers.
4. **Practice makes perfect**. There is no other way around the "10,000 hour rule" that Malcolm Gladwell introduced with his book, Outliers.

Telling your story isn't just about marketing. It's about leadership. Great people will only want to pursue great visions. If you can't articulate your potential greatness, you will never hire and motivate the kind of people who will make it happen.

Anyone up for a rendition of "Dream On" by Aerosmith?

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*The synopsis for To Rome with Love is from Wikipedia, lightly edited for readability.

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