

This is an edited transcript of the August 28, 2013 SmallBusinessTalent.com podcast interview titled [‘Find Your Story / Find Ideal Clients: An Interview With Hamilton Wallace.’](#)

Announcer: Are you a hard-working, self-employed professional striving for small business success? There is help. Welcome to the SmallBusinessTalent.com podcast featuring candid conversations about successful self-employment.

Stephen Lahey: Welcome to the SmallBusinessTalent.com podcast. I'm Stephen Lahey, and I'll be your host. I'm privileged to have Hamilton Wallace with me on the podcast today. Hamilton has been a successful small business marketing consultant since 1980.

He has an interesting way of summing up his 33 years spent helping small businesses to grow. Quote, human communication changes, human nature does not, unquote. I agree wholeheartedly. In fact, that statement sums up my own philosophy so well, I just had to have him on the podcast.

Today, Hamilton will be sharing his insights on marketing and the power of authentic storytelling to help you and your business to stand apart from the competition.

As he points out, a story well-told builds trust, comfort, and connection; only then does all that feature, function, and benefit stuff mean anything. That's a simple truth, but it's also very powerful.

Hamilton, thank you for joining me on the podcast. I've been looking forward to this.

Hamilton Wallace: Steve, it's my pleasure. I'm happy to be here.

Stephen Lahey: Before we dig into your wisdom on the power of storytelling in sales and marketing, tell us your story. What prompted you to start your own business and what are some of the milestones that have been part of your own small business journey?

Hamilton Wallace: Okay. My story really started when I was a kid; and when I was a kid I stuttered. And as a result of that, I thought long and hard

about everything that I would say. It made me acutely aware of how you put words together and it really impacted my life.

And then in college I walked out of a class on the first day with this unbelievable feeling that I had quote, unquote, come home. The class was reasoning, logic, and persuasion. It became my major, and now it's truly the business that I'm in. I mean, fundamentally I am charged with helping my clients persuade.

After I graduated and began selling for IBM, I was really flabbergasted at something that kept happening. My observations over coffee or lunch, very casual kinds of conversations – hey, how's your business going, and what about this, and have you thought about trying that? Those observations very often were more impactful than all the expensive computer gear that I was selling to them. And trust me, for a 20-something kid, I just thought that's really bizarre. My ideas were more impactful than all of this expensive R&D and all the gear and everything that IBM had to offer. So that got my attention and it became very satisfying. Almost addicting.

So I left IBM and I decided that I wanted to work in a smaller business. I did that for a few years and then really came to the conclusion that it's not that I didn't want to work for a big company, it's that I didn't want to work for any company. I just wanted to work for myself. And that was more than 30 years ago. I like to joke that I've been gainfully unemployed ever since.

Your question about milestones? Honestly, I think the first one was just pure and simple having the guts to start a business. I was leaving a salary. Of course, I was lucky that my wife had a job and so we had her salary. That made it less risky, but it was taking that first step is hard.

And I think the second milestone was when I developed a prospecting system that actually worked. And that was a tipping point where I went from being able to call myself a marketing consultant, and I had enough clients that I could actually call myself a marketing consultant, but it wasn't a business yet and it was a real struggle. When I finally developed a system that consistently got me in front of enough people who were qualified, that really did change my life because I was able then to start to be more discriminating with who I chose to do business with as

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opposed to you know what, if you stumbled onto me or I stumbled onto you, I went after you. I wanted your business. And that's a hard way to go.

So I think the major milestone for me was finally developing that system that got me in front of enough people that I started to say no occasionally.

Stephen Lahey:

What's interesting, as I think about your IBM sales career is how you started to get the sense that you could bring value to clients, that you could differentiate yourself as a sales person just by bringing your gray matter to the table, if you will. And doing it in a way that takes a certain attitude. You really wanted to help them. Your advice wasn't directly related to what you were selling, but you were building relationships.

Before the call you and I were talking about the difference between transactional and relationship-based businesses. Many consultants and coaches out there are quote, unquote, productizing their knowledge. That's a transactional business model. And if you don't have that interaction, the ability to really share your thoughts and listen to them, and deepen the relationship, then it is going to be transactional situation where you'll always be looking for that next big thing to promote. I think that leads to a lot of hype.

But what it takes to do what you're doing, it takes a system. Because in order to be selective, in order to take the time and develop relationships, you have to have enough good potential relationships queued up – and you have to be discriminating enough to know who you can really serve the best, and who you enjoy working with best. So an effective prospecting system is so key.

Now, in your book, *The Tao of Small Business Marketing*, you talk about the challenges of finding our small business story. Well, that's part of the system. That's sort of the rocket fuel that powers the system rocket. If you don't have a small business story that differentiates you, really what do you have?

So if we could just talk about that first, finding our small business story, why is it important, why is it difficult, and then maybe how it plugs into the overall system, that would be great.

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Hamilton Wallace: Trust me, it is critical. And it's really hard. It's not easy. First, the important part. It's important because of the world in which we live. Transparency has never been more prevalent in the marketplace. It's never been simpler to have the amount of information that you need literally at your fingertips to make a pretty good judgment before you make an initial contact on a company, on a consultant, et cetera.

So when you understand that, when you understand that your homepage is not your homepage, your homepage is Page 1 of a Google search, then you start to realize that all the features, how long you've been in business, blah, blah, blah, really aren't that important because everybody is saying that. I mean, if you're a consultant, who isn't saying that you've got a lot of experience and that you're smart, and that you've had all these successes. Well, so what truly then is making you different? And that gets back to story. The thing or things that you can say that nobody else can. The things that capture who you are and why you do what you do.

Now, the reason it's difficult is because we're human and that kind of self-introspection is hard. If you ask a lot of successful entrepreneurs, a lot of great sales people, pure sales people, what's the secret to your success? Why are you such a good sale person? Why when you walk into a room, you walk out with everybody's agreement? A lot of times they can't tell you, because they just don't know.

And that combined with the fact that there haven't been a lot of people like me and you telling people for a long time that story is important. Now, all of a sudden, boom, everybody is saying, well, story is really important. So we're faced with the situation where forever, perhaps, marketing has been about building a façade – and now that's starting to wear out. I mean, it really is starting to wear out.

With the transparency that's here, the goal needs to be to tell the story. The goal needs to be to give people your why. And that's why it's so important and that's why it's so hard.

Stephen Lahey: In your book you talk about the fact that stories are the root unit of how we communicate and understand each other, and I think that's a very profound principle when you think about sales, marketing, just human nature in general.

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Can you talk us through your thinking on that? Because I think that's something really important for people to understand.

Hamilton Wallace: We've been telling each other stories since we gathered around a campfire for warmth. You said earlier that one of the things I like to say is human communication changes, human nature doesn't. It was campfires, and then it was Benjamin Franklin's ad pamphlets when he wanted to raise money for a hospital, or this or that, then newspapers, magazines, radio, TV, direct mail, email, the Internet. So all of those things have changed, but that root unit, that form of communication really hasn't, and that is story. We tell each other stories. And so to the extent to which you can communicate with people within that form, you are going to be more successful because that's just how we're wired.

If you think about any religious book or any parable, trust me, in the Bible there aren't chapters that talk about the benefits, you know, the ten benefits of loving thy neighbor. There isn't a book in there about the 15 ways or reasons that you should be good instead of evil. There are stories. There's the story of Noah and his ark. There's the story of Moses. There are stories. And there's a reason for that. It's because that's how we're wired.

And that's why when we talk to prospects today that it probably is going to be more impactful for you to tell a story about a situation where you went above and beyond at 3:00 am to help a customer out instead of saying "we pride ourselves in the finest customer service in the industry." It's probably to your benefit to talk about, to show photos of, to do an interview with a user who has been operating your pump in the middle of the Arizona desert for the last 15 years without a service call if in fact one of the things that you feel differentiates you is reliability instead of saying our pumps are reliable. Well, congratulations, everybody's pumps are reliable. So you need to tell a story.

Stephen Lahey: Here's what I see when I look at your About page. It's a story of a real human being. And it's not lengthy, but it's something that humanizes you. You talk about your situation as a kid, that you stuttered, as you had shared with us earlier, and so on, but it all folds into the context of what you provide. And I think people are very hungry for that kind of context.

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There's so much information, more information than we've ever had available to us, but very often the context is missing and that's what is confusing, unsatisfying for people. How can I make a decision, I just don't know enough? We need context. That's one of the things that I think makes the story powerful, but what are the ingredients that you could point out that make for a good, engaging, persuasive story?

Hamilton Wallace: First and foremost, it needs to be real. It needs to be real, it needs to be true, and it needs to be personal.

It needs to capture the why. Why you could have done a lot things. We're so far beyond I'm a candle maker because my father was a candle maker and his father was a candle maker and his father was a candle maker. That doesn't happen anymore. So you could be doing a lot of things, so why are you doing what you're doing now?

So it needs to be real, it needs to be personal, it needs to talk about the why; but on a somewhat structural level, it helps if it has some movement. If it has some points of introspection where you sort of stepped back and you realized something. Obviously, it also needs to be emotional.

If you want to take the next step and talk about ingredients, there is a form that many famous stories have taken. You've probably heard the name Joseph Campbell. He wrote the book, *The Power of Myth*, back in the 90s. And he was probably the first person who coined the phrase the hero's journey. He certainly didn't invent the form because it's been around since the campfires. And to the extent to which you can put your story into this form it will resonate with people because this is the quintessential story form. If you look at so many of the *Bible* stories, if you look at *Star Wars*, if you look at *The Matrix*, if you look at just so many stories, it's the hero's journey.

And just very briefly, the hero is an otherwise ordinary person, it's you, it's me, whose life has been interrupted by a call to adventure. Something that you're afraid of, that you struggle against. And after initially refusing the call to action, the hero finds a mentor, either in a dream from within, or by meeting someone, you know, Obi-Wan Kenobi. The hero then learns what he or she needs to know to overcome the fear, to be able to break through obstacles. Think Jason and the Argonauts, think *The Odyssey*, think Moses.

And so they go on this journey, they transform themselves from an ordinary person into a hero by breaking through all these obstacles.

Of course, there's a happy ending, but it doesn't end there. The hero comes back into the ordinary world where they once lived with the form that's called the elixir, some element of the treasure that will transform the world. And that's the hero's journey.

And there are probably some of your listeners out there going, well, crap, I'm an HR consultant so my story doesn't involve slaying dragons or saving a prince or a princess, and so what's going on? [laughs]

But if you think about it, if you're truly passionate about what you do, if you have a uniqueness about what you do and why you're doing it, then you really are transforming a little piece of the your world for your customers. And if you didn't get past a lot of the dragons that you got past, more consultants, more professionals would probably be offering exactly what you offer. And the reality is that they don't. So that thing, that what, that what you know, that part of your experience that defines that uniqueness, that's your story.

Stephen Lahey: We all have stories that we take for granted because we are so close to them, and we don't necessarily see them as interesting or unique. I think oftentimes we're not that eager to tell about the challenges that we've faced because it was difficult, it was painful, perhaps, and we're not sure people want to hear about it.

Hamilton Wallace: Yeah.

Stephen Lahey: But that's exactly what people need to hear because that's the point where they can relate. Everybody has had those struggles and challenges. They need to be able to relate to you as a real person and the journey you've been on because in a sense that's what they're paying for because they don't necessarily want to go through all that hardship you went through in order to get to the other side. They want you to help them to get to the other side with a lot less pain and so on.

That's why I think that story is so powerful. They relate to you and they say, okay, I'm kind of in the middle of this, maybe he can help

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me to get through it without as much pain, trials and tribulation. Does that make sense?

Hamilton Wallace: It absolutely does. And the other thing that story does for you is that it gets people to stick around long enough to consume your message, to understand why you're different. And the goal now is to, with everything that you say, everything that you do is an authentic representation of who you are, then you're going to attract people naturally, the kind of people, the kind of customers you want. The type of customers that bring you energy, bring you joy, and bring you income as opposed to who do I need to be to attract the best clients? That's not where we are today at all.

Stephen Lahey: Yes, I agree with you on that. And one thing I will say is that, we had this conversation earlier in the podcast about productizing your knowledge and sort of making things transactional, I think that there's a place for giving people a taste of what you know, for example, your eBook, *The Tao of Small Business Marketing*. It's excellent, it doesn't waste time, it's right to the point, some very interesting content for people who prefer that as part of their process.

But I think that's the key issue. You have to look at the process they're going to go through and what they're most comfortable with. And yes, some people will want to read something. They don't want to pick up the phone. I'm much more inclined to pick up the phone and just talk to someone. And you're available to do that too. So it's giving them choices.

Hamilton Wallace: Right.

Stephen Lahey: When you're thinking about my listeners, a lot of them are solo practitioners. So they might be a consultant in a high tech space, or HR, they might be a business coach of one kind or another. Oftentimes, I think it's feast or famine for them. That's one of the challenges that they face. What is your experience been with consultants? For example, I notice you have a page on your website, it's Ask Me Anything where a consultant can set some time aside and talk to you and benefit from your 30 years of wisdom. What do you find that they're struggling with the most?

Hamilton Wallace: The questions I get are really based on the struggles that I went through, and it's how do I get more clients? I don't hear anybody

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say I just don't know if I know enough, if I have enough experience to be a consultant. Because the reality is if you are standing in front of a jungle, and I've been through that jungle a couple of times and you never have, then you probably ought to hire me to help you get through that jungle. Now, I may not be the world's greatest expert in getting through this jungle, but if I know more than you, then I can provide you with value. So the can I be a consultant, do I know enough is pretty much past with the folks who I talk to.

The people who come to my site to want to learn. They want to know how do I turn this into a business, how do I get more clients, and yeah, I've got some word of mouth, yeah, I have some contacts, but that really only takes you so far.

So I've been doing most of my work with consultant clients by helping them develop a prospecting program. We generally need to improve their website not so much in terms of does it look professional and those types of things, but more is it optimized for conversion for getting—

Stephen Lahey: And is it telling your story.

Hamilton Wallace: And is it telling your story.

Stephen Lahey: To get people to linger there.

Hamilton Wallace: Yes.

Stephen Lahey: I think it's important when you're thinking about your website to ask – what do you have on your website that makes people want to linger? You really can't skim a story the way you can skim their list of clients or the various things that you often see on consultants' or coach's websites, the bullet points. If you have a compelling story and probably some pictures, I notice on your website there are some pictures of you to give people a feel for who you are—

Hamilton Wallace: Right.

Stephen Lahey: —that's really critical and it speaks to the transparency issue you were talking about, but also you need something to be a magnet. And I think the magnet really is your humanity.

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And then it comes down to the structure of your website and how easy it is for people to engage with you somehow, whether it's opting in, and there on your website is the very obvious button – if you want to get the free book. Great. There on the website in red is the Ask Me Anything button if you're a consultant and you want to know more about what you can do for them. So it's all of those things make it easy to engage. It's working with human nature. That is basically what we're talking about.

Hamilton Wallace: Yeah, that's a great point and you're absolutely right. And optimizing your site for conversion, and is the story there, and are you present throughout the whole site? Then it's sort of the physics of marketing. It's bringing more of the right people onto your site, getting in front of more of the right people more often. So it's numbers and it's frequency. It's story, etc.

And it's also really forcing people to define their target client. I just started working with a consultant in San Francisco, and I said who is your optimum client, and he wants to get in front of architectural firms. And the first thing out of his mouth was the first thing out of a lot of people's mouths and it's that, look, I can help virtually any architectural firm. I said I appreciate that, but that's not helping me a bit. And it's not helping you a bit. Tell me the single architectural firm that is just absolutely perfect for you. Who is your ultimate client?

I have an ultimate client that I've done a handful of things with my site. I have attempted to be absolutely as transparent and authentic as I possibly can and I speak to a single business owner and I know how old he is and how many years he's been in business and what his struggles are. And do I get people who aren't exactly like him? Yeah, I do. But I can't tell you the number of people who call me up and they say I'm good at a lot of things, but marketing isn't one of them.

And that's my first slide on my homepage. That's how my target client feels. They don't see themselves as a marketing expert who just needs more marketing help. They just don't. They know they're good at a lot of things, you know, I'm a great engineer, great software developer, I'm great at this, I'm great at that, but marketing isn't one of them. But that's a big part of it, too, to finally break through that temptation to throw a large net and speak just to that single person because it's so much more powerful.

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On one level, Steve, it's much harder than it's ever been, but on another level it's much easier than it's ever been. Just be yourself. And for a lot of us, it's like, well, I haven't had a lot of practice doing that. What we've been doing for so long is building this façade.

Stephen Lahey: Yeah, especially in Corporate America.

Hamilton Wallace: Yes.

Stephen Lahey: And I don't know anybody who is what I would call a credible consultant or business coach who didn't spend some time in Corporate America and get some grounding in business. There's the corporate conditioning process that you go through there.

We need to wrap up now. There's a lot I could say, but let me just point this out. For those of you who are hungry for more details, *The Tao of Small Business Marketing*, the book that you can download on [SmallBusinessMarketingConsultant.com](http://SmallBusinessMarketingConsultant.com), does go into some additional details. I think you'll find it very intriguing. And it won't waste your time. It's concise, it's to the point.

And I would also tell you – study the site itself. Study [SmallBusinessMarketingConsultant.com](http://SmallBusinessMarketingConsultant.com). Take a look at the story on the About page. And while you're there, if you're a consultant, you'll see that there's a link to the right that says Ask Me Anything, take a look at that page. You'll see that everything that he's been talking about today he will demonstrate by example on his website.

I know we haven't had a lot of time to talk. This half-hour or so podcast doesn't really give us a lot of time to dig into the details, but I think that will help.

Now, other than visiting [SmallBusinessMarketingConsultant.com](http://SmallBusinessMarketingConsultant.com), is there anything else that you'd recommend that listeners do to get to know you? Obviously downloading your book, as well.

Hamilton Wallace: Steve, I think that's it.

Stephen Lahey: Thank you so much for joining me. I really appreciate it.

Hamilton Wallace: Steve, it was fun. Thank you.

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Stephen Lahey: And to our listeners, thank you for spending some time with us today. If you like what you heard, visit [SmallBusinessTalent.com](http://SmallBusinessTalent.com) now and subscribe to this podcast by email. And, when you do, you'll be alerted whenever I post fresh podcast content, of course, but you'll also receive special resources for email subscribers only, including subscriber bonus content. For example, I just released a free LinkedIn marketing guide, which I know you'll love. Thanks again for listening and best wishes for your success.

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