

Bring suspense into your self-marketing!

“We’re sitting together at a table, having a conversation. There’s a bomb under the table. If the bomb explodes without the audience knowing beforehand, that’s a shock – a surprise. But if the audience knows there’s a bomb under the table and that it’s going to explode in five minutes, then there’s tension. The audience wants you and me to leave the table. That’s suspense.”

Peter Näf

This is how Alfred Hitchcock explained to François Truffaut in the book “Hitchcock”, how did you do it? what suspense means – and how it differs from surprise. It’s an idea that also applies to the stories you tell in your self-marketing.

Why is it worth telling your career story in reverse chronological order when asked in an interview to “Tell us about yourself”? I explained this in my article “What sticks better – the beginning or the end of a story?” The reason: the tension drops when you only describe the climax – your current situation – at the very end. Then the bomb goes off when your interviewers are already thinking about something else.

Suspense vs. surprise

When using storytelling to illustrate your personal strengths, your stories are usually short. In these cases, you can tell them in the usual chronological order – ending with the surprise, like the punchline of a joke. Because of their brevity, you can maintain the narrative tension without extra structure – provided you tell the story engagingly.

Some success stories, however, take longer to tell – for instance, when you describe a project

that lasted months or even years. One client told me such a story: she built a platform to coordinate international projects for her company. The project was technically demanding and organisationally complex, as she had to win over and coordinate colleagues across functions and countries.

More Columbo than Whodunit

She faced numerous obstacles but managed to overcome them through negotiation skills, tactical sensitivity, persistence and remarkable oversight. The story was interesting – yet, as little happened dramatically, it felt a bit long.

How she could have made it more captivating I discovered by chance: one day, she mentioned offhandedly, “No one had asked me to develop a platform.” That detail was new to me – and the perfect opening for her story. By describing the outcome right after the initial situation, the listener knows more than the protagonists in the story – just like in Hitchcock’s definition of suspense. It sparks curiosity: how did she come up with that idea, and what steps did she take to reach her goal?

It’s a bit like Inspector Columbo in the series of the same name: the victim is dead, the culprit is known. In a classical whodunit, the credits would now roll. But in Columbo, that’s where the fun begins: we watch the detective solving the puzzle – a dramaturgy that worked wonderfully over 67 episodes and 30 years.

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