Every day dozens of Zurich Insurance risk engineers visit customer sites. This adds up to thousands of direct customer interactions and reams of risk insights fed back to the customers’ risk managers. In addition, Zurich’s global relationship leaders (GRLs) utilize their own meetings with corporate customers to make recommendations for risk management for the following year, always hungry to understand their customer’s risk exposures better than the customer.

Examining these activities in 2007, a compelling message emerged: both customer and insurer benefit from a relationship based not on the transaction alone but on valuable knowledge-sharing.

Here was an opportunity – to develop a genuine point of differentiation in the market by emphasizing risk insight – and a challenge – to change the culture of the organization so that time-pressured GRLs would incorporate even more of the contribution of the risk engineers in their conversations with risk managers.

The potential benefits were clear: the ability to put a premium price on certain products and services, greater customer loyalty, cross-selling of products and services and an enhanced reputation for customer insight and innovation.

**Unique Culture Proposition**

In essence, Zurich was not envisioning a Unique Selling Point (USP) but a Unique Culture Proposition (UCP), or how the company culture – “the way things are done around here” – would stand out as a point of competitive differentiation.

A UCP can be defined as a *simple, direct message that governs all your people’s actions at all times and carves out your own space in the market for customers and/or talent.*

To explore the implications of this definition, a UCP is what governs behaviour within an organization while a classic USP focuses on the nature of the product or service. Most of us are
How can you transform the way you do things into a compelling sales proposition? Zurich Insurance has created a Unique Culture Proposition which may well be its Unique Selling Point. Adam Kingl tells the story.
familiar with the 4 Ps of marketing (price, product, place, promotion) and how differentiating any one of these building blocks can carve out a USP. Like a USP and its 4 Ps, a UCP is built on a handful of building blocks: values, mindsets or assumptions, processes or systems, incentives and stories.

The UCP that Zurich pursued was clear. Aligning mindsets and behaviours around that goal was the challenge, and the anticipated result was serving customer needs not only better but uniquely. The means to that end was to make explicit the value of Zurich’s own people, particularly risk engineers, to the customer via the customer’s primary contacts, the GRLs. This initiative aimed to create real economic value for the company because its aim was for the GRLs and risk engineers to work differently together and to appear differently to their customers. That is a true UCP.

Storytelling change
In spring 2007, the risk engineering team met with a senior group of GRLs to turn their vision of a UCP into reality. In their first design meeting, the team conceived a workshop that would be run in several key cities in Europe and North America for the local GRL communities.

One of the first points agreed by the group was that the workshop should prompt stories among the audience in order to lend credibility and to provide examples of how the suggested way of working has succeeded in the past. There were also many more general reasons why storytelling would be a powerful tool: stories are easy to remember by everyone in a community; they create a shared context; they have emotional resonance; and they provide a touchstone for how things were, are, or should be.

The team concluded that a hypothetical customer story would be a valuable vehicle for delivering their story. But this would not be a case study in the classic sense, more of a Choose Your Own Adventure type of customer story that can encompass all variety of risk challenges. Each workshop group would be divided into smaller groups to solve the challenges important to them. In that manner, the workshop designers would also put a risk engineer with each group to collaborate.

The emphasis in the workshop was on sharing new ways of working and starting to practise them in a safe environment; storytelling to suggest practical ways of working in closer collaboration with risk engineers; using an experiential, interactive approach; leaving the GRLs with tools to facilitate this new way of working and a forum to share success stories and suggestions; and overall the onus was on the delegates themselves coming up with ideas and solutions rather than being taught.

The workshop
Fast forward three months to the first workshop in London. The facilitator began the day: “Today is going to be about stories and about sharing experiences with one another. I encourage you to volunteer any stories from your own experience that are relevant to what we’re talking about. Now we’d like to tell you a story about a hypothetical customer called North Star Corporation.”

As the facilitator painted the picture of this customer, their risk challenges and Zurich’s own challenges in offering added value and fending off competitors, the GRLs started whispering to one another. As the facilitator continued the customer scenario, questions started popping up from all over the room. When the facilitator wrapped up and asked for solutions related to one specific line of the customer’s business requiring risk engineering insight, the murmuring in the room swiftly evolved to raucous debate. To a very senior audience, having the lessons come from one’s own colleagues was an extremely powerful method of earning buy-in and credibility.

For example, one GRL told of his experience with a customer in the bottled water industry: “When the account came up for renewal, we proved that the customer could rely on our portfolio of risk engineering services as a key differentiator in order for us to fend off a competitor whose bid for their business was $80,000 less than ours. I’m sure the competitor looked at the customer’s loss results and saw a prime candidate for cherry-picking. The customer really relied on us to justify their recommendation to their board.

“We helped this customer in a number of bespoke ways based on the feedback and reports from risk

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engineering’s industrial hygienists. When it came time for the customer to decide, we brought along a list of risk engineering’s accomplishments for this customer as part of our pitch. Our service record made their decision easy. When things pop up out of the blue, we are flexible enough to address it. They appreciate the fact we’re responsive, treat them professionally and go above and beyond. They’re one of our top customers, and we let them know it.”

As the customer scenario’s details were revealed and new questions posed, the audience were effectively practising what it meant to live the UCP that the workshop was suggesting. The energy, engagement and nature of conversations during and after the workshops gave the risk engineering team great hope that their story had cut through, and their UCP was beginning to take shape.

The story continues
A year on, it was clear that, for Zurich, storytelling is a better driver of cultural change than PowerPoint, memos, posters, or chalk and talk. How Zurich’s value proposition and strategy are communicated and behaviours aligned had changed.

Insiders witnessed a shift in customer relationship teams with deeper communication between risk engineers and GRLs. New customer and internal dynamics were immediately apparent. “All are beginning to understand the value, contribution and potential of risk engineering engagement,” said one workshop participant. “The workshop has triggered many activities in France. From my point of view, it went from being aware of what risk engineering is capable of to actually using their services. We will be customizing a risk engineering service strategy for all our global customers,” said another.

One and only
There is no one approach that serves all when it comes to developing a Unique Culture Proposition. The uniqueness really is the thing. But, Zurich’s example proves that a tailored and thoughtful response that recognizes the importance of connecting to one another through the emotional and visceral power of stories can be hugely effective – even in the most traditional of industries.

Within Zurich, stories continue to pour in about accounts won, new lines of business opened for current customers, and customer loyalty deepened. Fortune has favoured those brave individuals and the business leaders who dared stick their necks out and offer a new proposition. There will undoubtedly be more to this story as Zurich’s UCP unfolds, but the first chapter of our tale is done.

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Best practice