



## Tales from the Valley

Lisa Alcalay Klug, [Forbes ASAP](#), 04.02.01

### Storyteller helps tech consultants convey their vision to customers and clients

With his tattered fedora, salt-and-pepper beard, and humorous depictions of the mythic Jewish city of Chelm, traveling storyteller Joel Ben Izzy could easily have been sitting on a bench in some Eastern European shtetl. Instead, he was engaging a mostly male audience, dressed in khakis and polos. After pizza and beer, the audience listened to Ben Izzy's stories and then spun their own, turning a small ballroom at the Marriott in Santa Clara, California, into something resembling a Boy Scout campfire. It's all part of their orientation as Hewlett-Packard consultants.

In the past year, Ben Izzy has led storytelling workshops for nearly 1,000 new HP consultants as part of the company's Wisdom Dissemination Project. He teaches them how to craft appropriate analogies, tell stories to convey a vision, and use anecdotes to communicate more effectively with clients.

A much-sought-after storyteller, the 41-year-old Ben Izzy also appears at schools, libraries, camps, and synagogues. His earlier career as a Paris street mime was interrupted by sound-sensitive gendarmes who objected to what they complained was his "noisiness." As a storyteller, Ben Izzy can now make as much noise as he wants.

He's been such a hit at HP that Ben Izzy has been sent to perform at company locations in Amsterdam, Brussels, and Perugia, Italy. He's also helped produce a booklet of stories for new consulting recruits. The goal is to encourage employees to create a virtual bag of stories, symbolized by the shoddy leather case of props Ben Izzy totes to every gig. "The imagination is a muscle, and you have to exercise it," he says.

Ben Izzy, who is based in Berkeley, California, has even begun coaching a senior executive at Agilent Technologies, the \$10 billion HP spin-off. "Joel has the ability to help me pull stories out of my own life," says Steve Hoffmann, vice president of Agilent's imaging electronics division. "It was a blast. The more we talked, the more fun and power I saw in it. I've ripped off a few of his concepts already."

Hoffmann says that storytelling skills translate into more effective speeches as well as more compelling conversations with coworkers. For example, some members of Hoffmann's department are resistant to growing the business and prefer to stay focused on existing customers. Others want to put all their energies into new opportunities. Ben Izzy's analysis: "That's a 'roots and wings' story. An ancient Chinese proverb states that there are two things we can give our children: roots and wings. The roots are the existing customer. The wings are the new opportunities."

For Hoffmann, who speaks with the measured cadence of an engineer, "Having a story like that gives me a real simple way in a three-minute conversation to make clear to people what we are trying to do. I tell that story to the designers, engineers, and managers that are developing the products for the 'roots' and also for the 'wings.' This gives them a framework for what they are doing and how they fit in."

For Ben Izzy, tale-spinning has become a way to be paid for his passion. "Economically, it's just a great business, storytelling," he says. "My wares weigh exactly nothing. I pay no customs when I cross borders. I sell my stories and I get twice as many back in return."