

Maple's Changing Story

Dr. Michael Lange, Associate Professor, Champlain College

It is no secret to any maple producer how important the story of maple is in selling a bottle of syrup. But why and how is a story important? And why and how can maple producers shape the story to best connect with potential customers? The first thing to understand is how stories work in the first place.

I'm an anthropologist and a folklorist, and I study stories for a living. I also used to work as a storyteller, giving me another window into how stories work. The most important thing to understand about stories is that they are communicative – they communicate, by sending out messages that someone else is supposed to receive, and make sense of. The hope and key to successful communication is that the sense the receiver makes of a story is pretty much the same as the sense the sender of the story is trying to get across.

For the past eight years or so, I've been doing research on maple syrup, primarily in Vermont, and I've been focusing on how people make and use the story (or stories) of maple. My research method, ethnography, involves going straight to the source – sugarmakers. I have spoken with sugarmakers all over the maple-producing world, including producers in every county in Vermont, as well as New York, Maine, New Hampshire, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Newfoundland, and of course Quebec. In these conversations, sugarmakers have taught me much and shared their ideas with me. These conversations have been especially useful in understanding the great

changes that the maple industry and market are undergoing at the present moment. Change is nothing to new to sugarmakers, of course, but I have been paying special attention to the changes that maple has seen over the past few years, and among the things that have changed is the maple story.

There are many stories attached to maple, and every sugarmaker has their own story to tell, with the particulars of their family, or their sugarbush, or their evaporator rig, so to talk about "THE story of maple" is a little bit false. Likewise, there are many, many moving parts to the maple industry, and all those parts have a valid role to play in making, transporting, selling, and protecting maple, so many stories can be told there as well. The story of how many gallons per hour an RO unit runs is just as real and necessary as the story of when such and such a sugarhouse was first built in the 1800s.

So, in talking about "the maple story" I'm not talking about one unified and monolithic narrative that everyone shares and identifies with equally. The story I discuss here is a core narrative, widespread among many sugarmakers, which has central parts that are common across many different places and tellings. It's a generic story of maple, some version of which is widely known and used by many people when talking about maple. It's a story of 40/1, of 40° F during the day, of 40 acres of hillside. It's a story that sells maple.

The story that sells maple is well

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known. I have heard parts of it told hundreds of times by now, both to me and to others while I've been a bystander. It's a story of simplicity and straightforward processes, even if the realities of sugaring are much more complex. How many of you have told someone that it takes 40 gallons of sap to make one gallon of syrup? 40/1 is a number I have seen and heard more times than I can count, but every sugarmaker I know is well aware that that number is a bit of a lie. The "real" number is 43/1, and that's only true if your tree is putting out sap at 2% sugar concentration. The great variety of sap that the trees give means that the actual number of gallons needed to produce a gallon of syrup can vary wildly from season to season, from run to run, and from tree to tree. The story of 40° F is closer to the mark, but again, variations abound. A

slope that faces south is going to warm up quicker than a north-facing one, so 40° may happen at very different times for different trees. And the realities of vacuum systems mean that what used to be a necessary temperature swing from freezing to 40° is no longer as necessary in the first place. Sugarmakers know these variations and complexities quite well. So why are they not part of the standard story of maple? Why will people be less inclined to buy a quart of syrup if the simplified story is not attached?

Some of the reason is that when a consumer buys a bottle of syrup, they are not just buying it because of the story, they are in a fairly literal sense buying the story. Buying a consumer good

is very often an experiential thing, and people want a very specific kind of experience. When a visitor comes into a sugarhouse, providing that experience is a straightforward task, and often takes care of itself. If there's a boil on, the evocative sights and smells of the steam rising from the pan or the sounds of the roaring flame and the roiling sap are enough of an experience to excite a mind and open a wallet. However, if a bottle of maple is simply sitting on a shelf, some other experience needs to take the place of standing next to the evaporator. The story of maple very often takes that place. It provides the consumer with a sense of the experiences involved in making syrup, and the more evocative that sense can be, the more likely that hearing the story will translate into an open wallet.

Simplicity in the story helps in two ways. First, a simple story is easier to digest and make meaning with. It's not just millennials whose attention spans are shorter these days, so condensing and simplifying a story has a better chance of grabbing and keeping a potential customer's attention (and cash). Second, a simple story suggests a story of simplicity, and simplicity is part of what people expect, and want, from maple syrup. The consumer wants a product that is non-industrial, non-mechanical, and non-technological, because so many parts of their lives feel industrialized and mechanicalized and technologized. A story of simplicity evokes a time and place that, for many consumers, is not when and where they live. Vermont. The Eastern Townships of Quebec. Wooded

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hills in New Brunswick and Maine. Such places are romanticized, thought to hold onto the past (disregarding the fact that the people who live in these places live very much in the present). The consumer wants to evoke that experience through a maple story, not the mechanized, technologized version of sugaring that involves plastic tubing and reverse osmosis.

So the maple story is one of a simple way of life, and a simple way of making syrup, and the story is told and retold by many people. That's not the only avenue through which the story of simplicity is delivered to the consumer though. This story of simplicity is abundantly evident on many of the standard bottles in which syrup is sold. The iconography on the bottles very often includes a man or men (women are nearly absent from the imagery of maple, despite the large and important presence of women in the making of maple) in a red checked coat, flannel hat, driving a team of horses to gather sap out of buckets, often wooden ones. This depiction is very much an older way of doing things, a way that hides the very wide spread of technologies such as plastic tubing, reverse osmosis, and vacuum systems from the consumer.

These kinds of containers, with these kinds of stories, have been the norm in many parts of the sugaring world for quite some time, but more recently, imagery has been diversifying. Some of the diversification is simply due to the ability to diversify – newer technology for designing, applying, and producing labels has brought costs down to the point that more people can design their own labeling and imagery. Rather than being tied into a standard design by the container options, more sugarmakers are opting to make their own labels, with their own choices in imagery. This option creates a more complicated story, by making it possible to have more stories told on the bottles. But another factor is also strongly at play in reshaping the maple story, first on containers, and eventually throughout the maple process.

Early on, I said that stories work by communicating, by transmitting an idea from a sender to a receiver through narrative. That's how it works, no matter who the sender is or who the receiver is. When the maple world was selling its syrup largely to itself (New England, Quebec, and eastern Canada), telling a story of the way “we used to be” was a straightforward process. Pretty much everyone in that part of

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the world knows what flannel is, and knows how handy flannel is when stomping around in cold winter woods. So, a story that included flannel could easily and simply be told. It was a safe assumption that the person hearing it would understand. The simple story of maple didn't need to change because it was being told largely to a knowing audience. However, the major growth markets in maple aren't in southeastern Canada and the northeastern US; the fastest growth is taking place overseas, in places like Japan, Australia, and China. In these places, the audiences don't have the same memories of flannel jackets and wooden buckets. So, what is a simple story to understand in New Hampshire would need some translation in Japan, and not just language translation. The story would need cultural translation, and that makes it complicated. A horse team and wood-

en buckets doesn't automatically carry the same meaning or tell the same story outside of that corner of North America.

So, the same story that sells maple simply in one place, makes it complicated in another. When maple is primarily being sold in the one place, that's not a problem. But as more and more maple is being sold in another, and when the future growth market is in that other place, a different story needs to be told. The story should still be a simple one, but the simplicity needs to account for the translation across geography and culture. Many of the newer, individual labels on syrup containers now show trees, mountains, or other generalized or stylized images of nature. The natural world feels more universal, more widely understandable without the need for translation of specialized, regional knowledge. A leaf on a food con-

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tainer carries similar meaning, it tells a similar story, to someone in China as it does to someone in Nova Scotia. It's a simple story that works in both places.

The story of maple is changing, at least in the telling. In truth, the story is the same, but stories are told and heard, printed and seen by people. If some of

the people hearing and seeing the story change, then the story changes too. So really what is happening is not so much the story itself changing in some fundamental way, but that the audience is growing. As any storyteller will tell you, the audience always shapes the story you tell.

The Work of Maple Associations

A panel discussion at the NAMSC annual meeting offered a number of suggestions for ways state and provincial associations can help their members.

Promote your members: A maple association's first priority should be to promote the work and products of its members. Second priority should be to promote the use of pure maple. The association itself should be as transparent as possible to the general public.

Printed materials: Offer a range of printed materials so that there's something available for every purpose. Wallet-sized cards for consumers, rack-sized brochures for displays, posters for hanging, bumper stickers, etc.

Distribution: Find allied organizations to distribute your printed materials: chambers of commerce, state departments of agriculture, tourism offices, visitors' bureaus with displays at rest stops, buy-local organizations, other agricultural support groups, etc.

Events: Hold 'kickoff' events at the beginning of the season and invite the governor and other local dignitaries.

Press releases: Look for reasons to send press releases to newspapers and

TV and radio stations. During the season is obvious, but also think about sending one when the NASS survey numbers are released, or when there are contest winners to announce.

Working with the press: Help your members understand what messages to offer reporters when they call. Focus on positive stories. Even if it's a poor season, talk about how they're making excellent syrup and there will be plenty available for customers. Make sure that photos show clean, modern processes, rather than rusty taps.

Social media: Use Facebook to promote members' sugarhouses and events. Post recipes to demonstrate the versatility of maple syrup. Encourage members to 'like' the association's page, which will, in turn, give them lots of posts to share with their customers.

Website: Association websites should feature directories to steer consumers to sugarhouses. Pages with lots of recipes are also popular.

Messages: Connect maple messages with other popular themes, like buying local products to support the local economy, environmentally sustainable stewardship of land, and nutrition.