

# The Nike Story? Just Tell It!

By Eric Ransdell

When most people think of Nike, they think of superstar athletes like Michael Jordan, Mia Hamm, and [Tiger Woods](#). When Nike's own employees think of their company, they think of a retired university track coach, an Olympic runner whose career ended tragically in a 1975 car crash, and a so-so athlete whose achievements as an entrepreneur far outpaced his accomplishments as a runner.

Most people have heard of Nike CEO [Phil Knight](#), a middle-distance runner who turned selling shoes out of his car into a footwear-and-apparel colossus. But few know of Nike cofounder [Bill Bowerman](#), Knight's coach, or of [Steve Prefontaine](#), the now-deceased runner who was also coached by Bowerman and whose crusade for better equipment inspired Bowerman and Knight to build the Nike empire. Yet, inside Nike, those three figures are more relevant to the company's sense of identity than any of its superstar spokespeople.

Why? Because Nike has made understanding its heritage an intrinsic part of its corporate culture. Think of this approach as internal branding: The stories that you tell about your past shape your future. Which is why, these days, Nike has a number of senior executives who spend much of their time serving as "corporate storytellers" -- explaining the company's heritage to everyone from vice presidents and sales reps to the hourly workers who run the cash registers at Nike's stores. "Our stories are not about extraordinary business plans or financial manipulations," explains [Nelson Farris](#), 57, Nike's director of corporate education and the company's chief storyteller. "They're about people getting things done."

And like all great stories, the ones about Nike offer archetypes that people can learn from. When Nike's leaders tell the story of how Coach Bowerman, after deciding that his team needed better running shoes, went out to his workshop and poured rubber into the family waffle iron, they're not just talking about how Nike's famous "waffle sole" was born. They're talking about the spirit of innovation. Likewise, when new hires hear tales of Prefontaine's battles to make running a professional sport and to attain better-performing equipment, they hear stories of Nike's commitment to helping athletes.

Over the past couple of years, Nike has experienced the roller coaster that lots of companies ride: euphoric periods of growth followed by setbacks and public backlash. But through all of these ups and downs, winning companies hold on to their values. "To survive those downtimes," explains Farris, "you have to understand what real teamwork is -- keeping promises, keeping commitments. Not everyone understood this, but both Knight and Prefontaine did, because that's what Bowerman taught his athletes. As one of our first employees said, 'Not everyone grew up on the track with Bowerman. They didn't understand what it took to be great.' "

To foster that kind of understanding, the company launched its corporate-storytelling program. When the program started, in the late 1970s, it was an hour-long lesson given to new employees when they arrived to sign their W-2s. Today, orientation lasts two days, and the story of Nike's heritage is the first item on the agenda. With the company back on the growth track, Farris envisions a day when the orientation process will last a week and take place at "Nike University."

Storytelling isn't just for new hires. Each "Ekin" ("Nike" spelled backwards) -- Ekins are tech reps known for their Swoosh ankle tattoos -- undergoes a nine-day Rookie Camp at Nike headquarters in Beaverton, Oregon. A full day is spent in Eugene, where Ekins run at the Hayward field track (where Bowerman coached) and visit the site of Prefontaine's fatal car crash. "We're connecting what we're doing today back to Nike's heritage," says Dennis Reeder, 45, Ekins training manager.

As Nike gets even bigger, its storytellers feel that their mission becomes even more critical. "Every company has a

history," says Dave Pearson, 43, a training manager and storyteller. "But we have a little bit more than a history. We have a heritage, something that's still relevant today. If we connect people to that, chances are that they won't view Nike as just another place to work."

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## **Sidebar: Shoe Stories**

Nike spares no expense when it comes to telling the stories of Phil Knight, Bill Bowerman, Steve Prefontaine, and the founding of the company. Here's what goes on these days around the Nike campfire.

### **Bring Your Heritage to Life**

The Nike store in Eugene, Oregon opened last May. Think of it as Nike's Smithsonian Institution. A Heritage Wall includes everything from the shoe molds that Bowerman made with his family's waffle iron to the first pair of Nike running shoes to ever cross a finish line.

### **Tell Your History by Design**

Whether it's Bowerman Drive (which leads into the Nike campus), the Joe Paterno Child Development Center (named after the Penn State football coach), or the Bo Jackson fitness Center, every aspect of Nike's headquarters reinforces its heritage.

### **Tell Your Story to Your Customers**

Nike's corporate storytelling does not end with its employees. "Ekins," for example, are responsible for telling the Nike story to salespeople at the Athlete's Foot, Foot Locker, and other large retailers that carry the Nike product line.

Why? "Because when people understand why we exist, what our foundation is, and who we are today, then they understand that all of our products are still rooted in improving an athlete's performance," says Ekins training manager Dennis Reeder. "It's no different from how it was when Bill Bowerman was in his workshop, tinkering and crafting shoes for his athletes at the University of Oregon -- only now we're doing it on a much larger scale."

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