



**A GUIDE TO STRATEGIC
AND SUSTAINABLE
NONPROFIT STORYTELLING**



GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY
School of Continuing Studies
Center for Social Impact Communication



Meyer Foundation

STORIES WORTH TELLING

Table of Contents

3	Foreword
4	About this Guide
6	What is a Story?
7	Five Essential Building Blocks of Compelling Stories
	7 AN EFFECTIVE CHARACTER
	12 TRAJECTORY
	14 AUTHENTICITY
	18 ACTION-ORIENTED EMOTIONS
	21 A HOOK
24	The Strategic Story Cycle
	25 PLANNING
	31 PRODUCTION
	39 DISTRIBUTION
	43 EVALUATION
49	The Culture of Stories
56	The Future of Storytelling
58	Methodology
59	Acknowledgements
61	About Us
62	References

STORIES WORTH TELLING

Foreword



 One of the most inspiring aspects of working in philanthropy is the opportunity to hear powerful stories from so many different organizations—stories of transformed lives, revitalized neighborhoods, and game-changing partnerships with business and government.

Occasionally, these narratives leap off the pages of grant applications, or are showcased on websites and social media—brilliantly conveying the power and impact of community organizations. More often, though, they are harder to find.

Through our partnerships with hundreds of nonprofits throughout the region, we've learned that effective storytelling is one of the biggest challenges facing the organizations the Meyer Foundation supports. Many of these small, community-based groups lack the human and financial resources needed to tell their stories. And investments in communications often take a back seat to more pressing community and organizational needs.

To better understand these challenges and how they could be addressed, in 2013 we began a partnership with the Center for Social Impact Communication, an academic center within Georgetown University's Division of Professional Communication dedicated to helping communications professionals use their skills for positive social impact. Our work together included a survey of grantees, a review of their current storytelling practices, and a series of workshops for executive directors and key staff.

This publication is the culmination of that initiative, which we called "Stories Worth Telling." It pulls together what we learned through surveys, research, and the workshop series to help small nonprofits understand the basics of storytelling and how to create systems within their organizations that will

produce better stories. We owe a special thanks to Denise Keyes and Julie Dixon at the Center for Social Impact Communication for their initial vision and for their thoughtful approach to this project, and to the skilled graduate students whose passion for social change helped drive the work.

While we hope that this guide will be a useful resource for nonprofit leaders and their organizations, we understand that a single publication—no matter how practical or comprehensive—won't by itself transform the storytelling practices of thousands of organizations. We also understand that effective storytelling requires talent, time, and money. In the coming months, we plan to continue the conversation about how the Meyer Foundation and other partners can ensure that nonprofits in our region have the tools and resources they need to tell their stories.

The stakes, after all, are high. Powerful stories can motivate volunteers, engage business leaders, galvanize public officials, and inspire donors. In a media landscape that grows noisier and more fragmented by the hour, everyone in our region needs to understand the life-changing and transformational work that nonprofits do every day.

Their stories are indeed worth telling. And we believe they must be told.

Nicky Goren, President & CEO

*Rick Moyers, Vice President for
Programs & Communications*

STORIES WORTH TELLING

About This Guide

When we began researching the topic of nonprofit storytelling in the summer of 2013, there were a few things of which we were (fairly) certain.

One, storytelling was a hot topic—and not just among nonprofits. Bloggers have heralded it the “[#1 Business Skill of the Next Five Years](#),” brands have embraced it as a way to authentically engage consumers across digital platforms, and an overwhelming amount of Internet real estate has been devoted to offering insights and tips on how and why organizations should tell their stories.

Which leads us to our second certainty: we’ve reached a point of resource overload. As of January 2014, there were more than 140,000 books on the topic available at Amazon.com; more than 9,300 Google search results devoted to nonprofit storytelling specifically, and—at peak times—upwards of 60 tweets an hour using the hashtag #storytelling. Yet, a key question remained in our minds: were any of these resources truly useful to smaller nonprofits?

And finally, we knew from existing research that storytelling is an effective way to move people to action. In a [survey of digitally active supporters of causes](#) conducted by the Center for Social Impact Communication in 2012, “reading a story on social media” was the number one motivator of the more than 50 percent of respondents who made the leap from supporting a cause online to also supporting it offline.

SURVEY SAYS:

96% of survey respondents agree that storytelling is an important part of their organization’s communications.

90% agree that they expect the importance of storytelling to increase in the coming 2 years.

And so, with these story truths in mind, we set out to dive more deeply into the current landscape of storytelling among small nonprofits—in the hopes of uncovering more of a complete picture of the gaps between the myriad storytelling resources available and the specific barriers, challenges and successes we observed among small nonprofits. We surveyed current grantees of the Meyer Foundation, conducted story audits of more than 150 nonprofits’ current online storytelling capabilities, and interviewed more than a dozen organizations that rated highly in our assessments. At the same time, we widened our lens to look at best practices in storytelling across industries and disciplines, through

IN THEIR OWN WORDS:

Why Meyer Grantee Nonprofits Tell Their Stories



**CHRISTINE LAUTERBACH,
FRIENDSHIP PLACE:**

“People give donations because they feel they are helping change someone’s life. Stories are vital to communicating to donors that lives are being changed.”



**NANCY LEOPOLD,
COLLEGETRACKS:**

“I don’t think one can be very persuasive on the fundraising front without evoking pictures and words about people who are the reason for the investment.”



**KERRIE WILSON,
CORNERSTONES, INC.:**

“Storytelling is critical for awareness and engagement. With our advocacy work, being able to capture WHY food stamps are important to a mother who is trying to make ends meet helps to paint a picture instead of relying on just the policy that doesn’t resonate with people.”

an analysis of existing storytelling literature and interviews with renowned practitioners and thinkers.

Our goal in creating this guide, and the accompanying worksheets and training tools, was to provide a comprehensive, strategic framework to guide the story collection, creation and sharing process at small nonprofits. This is not to say that larger organizations—even for-profit ones—can’t benefit from the recommendations and tools we’ve developed; rather, that we approached the process with a keen understanding of the capacity limitations facing smaller organizations and attempted to incorporate these throughout.

Similar to the stories your organization creates and shares, we hope that this guide will provide you with equal parts inspiration (by highlighting some of the most effective stories and practices of your peers) and education. And being that all great stories must have a call-to-action, ours is this: that you continue to invest in more strategic, engaging storytelling—and that you [share your successes with us](#).



For more tools and resources, visit bit.ly/nonprofitstorytelling, and join the conversation on Twitter using the hashtag #storiesworthtelling.

STORIES WORTH TELLING

What is a Story?

If you think of the skills needed to tell an organization's story in terms of a continuum, perhaps the most fundamental of these is the ability to recognize what, indeed, makes a piece of content a "story."

There's understandably a lot of confusion today about what a story is—and what it isn't. Brands label just about everything they share today as "stories." There are more choices than ever when it comes to story formats, the media in which they're produced, and on what channels and platforms they're shared. A story can be everything from a [140-character tweet](#), to a [longform interactive narrative](#), to a [six-second video on Vine](#).

But regardless of the platform, channel or medium, having an "ear" for story is essential. Developing a common definition of what your organization considers a story will help to guide the collection and creation process. For example, if a story has to contain some kind of a transformation, then which quotes and details will you need to gather when interviewing someone to effectively show that transformation?

In our survey of Meyer Foundation grantee nonprofits, we asked respondents to provide their own definitions of "story:"

"A human chronicle that creates an accessible connection between subject and reader through vulnerability and simplicity."

"Sharing our mission through real-life examples of success, using real feedback from participants and/or families."

"A story shares the 'why' our organization exists."

"A narrative that teaches one of the universals of our work through a lived experience."

"A narrative that turns facts and statistics into an emotional and compelling message about the impact of our services on the lives of those we serve."

"An emotional snapshot of how our organization has shaped our youth and staff—before, during, and after our program."

"Setting+characters+tension+moral with a beginning, middle, and end."

Looking across the many ways in which organizations articulated their story philosophies, several themes emerged—namely, transformation, real-life experiences, impact and emotion.

Each of these concepts is deceptively simple. When it comes to constructing stories, it can be dauntingly complex to demonstrate impact or to convey genuine emotion.

Instead, we recommend focusing on the five building blocks of compelling stories, which—taken together—will achieve the desired goal of showing transformation and impact by using real-life details and emotions.

STORIES WORTH TELLING

Five Essential Building Blocks of Compelling Stories



1. An Effective Character

Stories should contain a single, compelling character that is relatable to the audience and who is comfortable relaying specific details, memories and experiences.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE INDIVIDUAL

The most compelling, effective stories have a single character as their focal point. This is the person whose life has been impacted or changed by your organization—and it doesn't always have to be a beneficiary or client. Any of your organization's stakeholders—from donors, to volunteers, to the founder, to staff, to board members, to members of the broader community—can have terrific stories to share about how their lives have been impacted.

The key is in selecting just one to feature in any given story. "Readers and listeners have a hard time differentiating among multiple characters," says Ron Geatz, Director of Global Content Development at The Nature Conservancy. "Keep the number of characters to a minimum. Inexperienced producers falsely assume that more voices are better; they are not."

Many organizations may struggle to narrow their focus to just one individual story, thinking that they may lose the perception of the scope of the problem or the scale of their services. But, there are simple, effective ways to maintain the focus on the individual transformation while still giving a sense of the broader context.

"We do a zoom in, zoom out model where one story is shared of a particular person, couple or family," says Jean-Michel Giraud, executive

director of Friendship Place, a D.C.-based nonprofit that empowers men and women experiencing homelessness to rebuild their lives with the involvement of the community. "Then we zoom out to show this is one of a thousand...yet each story is very unique."

[Doorways for Women and Families](#) frequently employs this approach in its stories as well, adding text like the following to build context around an individual success story.

"Although Leila's story is not unique—her happy ending is. 1 in 4 women will be affected by domestic violence in their lifetime and approximately 75% of women who are killed by their abusers are murdered when they attempt to leave or after they have left an abusive relationship."

THE ORGANIZATION AS A SUPPORTING CHARACTER

Perhaps just as importantly, resist the temptation to position the organization as the main character. It's a common challenge; in our analysis of online stories, 45 percent cast the organization itself as the hero.

"The focus should be on the person; that is what people connect with," says Laura Pohl, a photographer and filmmaker who has worked with Bread for the World, and Catholic Relief Services, among other global NGOs.



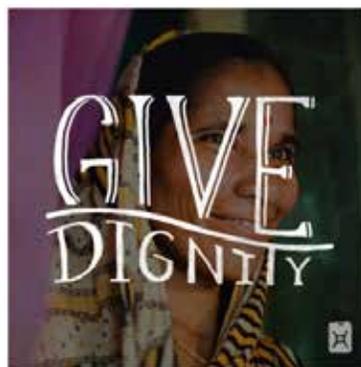
Source: Little Lights Urban Ministries / Vimeo

“People will find out who made it. They will know your name—it will happen!” This can be as simple as changing the title or headline of your story from “How We Helped John Smith Get Back on His Feet,” to “How John Smith Got Back on His Feet.”

“I try to help organizations find a way for people to tell their own story,” says Cara Jones, founder of Storytellers for Good. “Not that ‘we saved them,’ but that there was support there for them to save themselves.”

D.C. nonprofit Little Lights Urban Ministries waits until well past the half-way point of [this seven and a half-minute video](#) to even mention the name of the organization—but there’s no doubt in the viewers’ minds how the organization has made a difference in the main character’s life.

Or, consider [this story about the dire need for modernization of an elementary school](#) in the D.C. public school system. Rather than telling it from the organization’s point of view, Teaching for Change told the story of a concerned parent, watching his child suffer the effects of a subpar learning environment. This is impressive, since the topic (facility renovation) and the organization’s mission (encouraging advocacy and action) can combine to make for a particularly challenging storytelling environment.



Source: charitywater.org

WHAT MAKES A CHARACTER ‘EFFECTIVE?’

A UNIVERSAL NEED

Many supporters and donors of an organization will never physically experience what the character in your story is experiencing—and for this reason, it’s important to frame your stories in terms of the more [universal needs](#) that your characters possess. These are needs like acceptance, belonging, safety, self-respect, independence or growth.

When constructing your stories, think not only about the physical need that your organization is filling, but also about the corresponding, intangible need. A terrific example of this can be found in a [story campaign launched in late 2013 by charity:water](#), which encourages donors to think about what else they’re giving in addition to clean water—things like dignity, beauty, and hope.

RELATABLE

“Stories are powerful because they can engage our imaginations, taking us to places we’ve never been, and allowing us to feel part of experiences we may never have. But this extraordinary sense of transport happens only when we identify with one or more of the characters within the narrative. Suddenly, we see the world through their eyes and feel like the events are happening to us” (McDonald, 2010).

It’s important to establish this commonality up front in your stories. Lead with the things that make your characters similar to the audience, rather than those that make them different.

“What defines peoples’ lives is not poverty; it’s who they are as people,” says Sara Fajardo, an embedded storyteller and media point person for Catholic Relief Services’ East and Southern Africa regions.

Tahirih Justice Center echoes this approach in their storytelling. “We never want to ‘other’ our clients,” says Layli Miller-Muro, executive director. “We want people to relate.”

What does this look like in practice? Consider highlighting character traits like being a mother or father (as [Doorways for Women and Families does here](#)), interests or personality quirks. Create opportunities for your audience to get to know the character as a person first, and then introduce the need.

“[The need] is one factor in their lives but it’s not the defining factor,” says Fajardo.

Another way to forge a lasting bond between your character and your audience is by highlighting the “it could happen to me” factor.

“We use stories in a way that connects and links us as humans,” says Fajardo. “We’re trying to say ‘you should care because this person could be you.’”



Source: nyp.org

Take New York-Presbyterian’s terrific [“Amazing Things”](#) story campaign, for example. Each story features a relatable, everyday character battling an illness or condition that could, in theory, happen to anyone. [Evan’s Story](#) is a particularly strong example of the “it could happen to me” principle—he’s a healthy, bright college student when his health quickly deteriorates because of ulcerative colitis. (This story is also a fantastic example of sharing authentic details, outlined in the section below.)

THREE-DIMENSIONAL

Who else can help you to tell your character’s story? Consider incorporating the voices of family, friends, staff, volunteers, or others who could share examples, memories and details that will provide a 360-degree view of your character. Multiple perspectives can help sustain viewer or reader interest in a longer story and can also help you avoid sharing too much of the organization’s viewpoint alone.

Consider [this video story from St. Jude Children’s Research Hospital](#), in which we see and hear the main character’s family speak about him and share memories for nearly the first full minute before we

meet him. Or, this [video story shared by D.C.-based nonprofit Legal Counsel for the Elderly](#), which spotlights the tremendous efforts of a volunteer and features staff members providing examples that demonstrate her dedication.

While it takes additional planning and effort to collect the voices of others, this can go a long way toward making your stories more engaging and authentic.

CHARISMATIC

This can perhaps be the most elusive, hard-to-define trait of effective characters. “Charisma” can mean different things to different people, and the level of charisma required of your character can vary significantly depending on the medium being used to tell the story.

What it is:

- A willingness to recall and share specific details, memories and feelings in their own words. (Recall [Evan’s Story](#), above: his charisma is evidenced in the way he speaks about taking his pills and wanting to hug his doctors—certainly not the way the hospital may have said the same things.)
- Comfort with being recorded and/or photographed.
- Trusted relationship with the organization and staff who will be conducting the interview and producing the story.

What it isn’t:

- A perfectly polished, scripted spokesperson. Perfection is the enemy of authenticity.

Often, organizations feel pressure to choose the rare individual whose life has been entirely transformed—the “superstar” client who personifies the organization’s entire mission. This can limit not only the number

SURVEY SAYS:

90% of stories analyzed had clear heroes

62% were beneficiaries/clients

45% were the organization itself

59% of stories portrayed their heroes with dignity

24% with a mix of pity & dignity

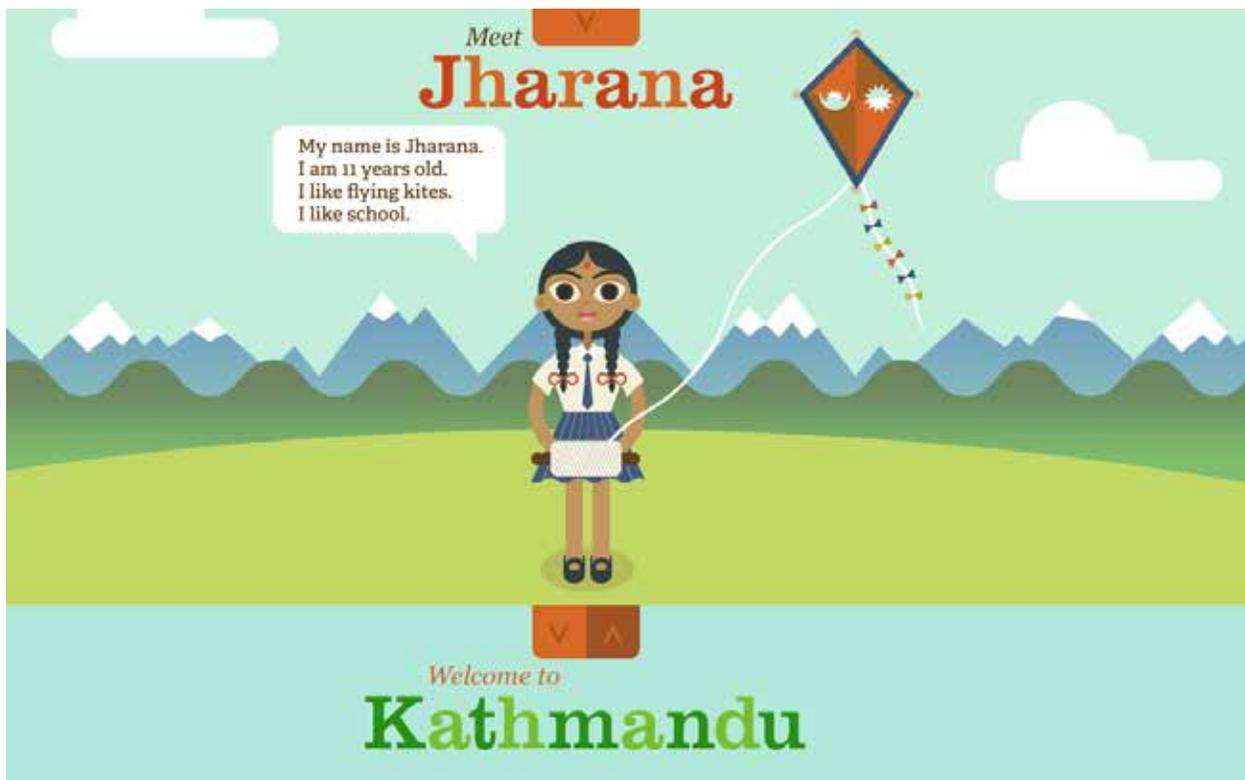
of stories you can collect and share, but also the relatability of those stories. Small stories of small transformations, victories and moments can be just as effective as the larger ones—especially if they come from a charismatic, engaging character.

DEALING WITH CHARACTER PRIVACY & CONFIDENTIALITY

Many organizations—even after finding an effective character to tell his or her story—must deal with issues of privacy and confidentiality when telling that story. Organizations like [Tahirih Justice Center](#) routinely and seamlessly navigate this complex issue by adding a simple disclaimer to the bottom of their online stories, stating:

“All names have been changed to protect client privacy. The photograph included here is not of Muna and was generously provided by Pouria Lotfi.”

There is a simple process that organizations can adopt to ensure that identities are being protected when necessary and that all individuals are aware that their stories are being shared.



Source: splash.org

1. Obtain written permission from any individuals you collect stories, quotes, images or video footage from, using a standard form. (The NYC Department of Education has a nice release [template](#) that could be adapted by organizations for their own use.) Note that if you are interviewing or photographing minors, you must obtain written permission from their parents or guardians.
2. Keep these releases on file wherever you maintain the rest of your story and/or photo databases.
3. If necessary, use a different name or leave out key identifying details. (In general, we caution against creating “composite” characters that use details and stories from multiple individuals. Both transparency and authenticity can be significantly reduced when this tactic is used.)
4. Visually, privacy can be maintained by showing images that focus on close-up details (for example, hands), silhouettes, or alternative angles rather than on faces or other identifying images.

5. Be transparent when names are changed, by adding a disclaimer that appears in or alongside the story.

The following stories are additional examples of how organizations have creatively told their stories while maintaining character confidentiality:

- [Feeding America – Hungry Kate: The Girl With A Belly Ache](#) (creating a hypothetical)
- [Fair Girls – Backpage](#) (transparently using a stand-in/actor to reenact documented dialogue)
- [Splash – Meet Jharana](#) (using an animated hypothetical)



Use this [Character Study Worksheet Tool](#) to help your organization create more authentic, compelling characters.



2. Trajectory

Stories should chronicle something that happens—an experience, a journey, a transformation, a discovery—but they don't need to be a linear, sequential recounting every time.

Think about the stories you tell in your daily life. Chances are, they have one central characteristic in common—they are about something that happened. For a nonprofit story to be effective, it has to capture the “what happened,” whether this is a transformation, a discovery, a journey or an experience.

“You need a beginning, a middle and an end,” says Ron Geatz of The Nature Conservancy. “If you don’t know what the structure of a story is, it’s hard to put the meat on the bones.”

This structure is traditionally referred to as a plot, but we prefer the term **trajectory**. It implies momentum—energy that pulls the reader or viewer forward, ideally to the conclusion of the story at which point they are presented with a compelling call-to-action.

The most basic story structure—and most often used by nonprofits, filmmakers and novelists, with good reason—is the “hero’s journey,” or “challenge plot” as it’s called by Chip and Dan Heath in their 2007 book *Made to Stick*. We are introduced to a character at the beginning, and then follow her as she faces a series of barriers to achieving her goals. She ultimately encounters some sort of climax situation (perhaps when she is introduced to the nonprofit and its services), after which we get a quick resolution and perhaps a picture of how her life is different today now that she has fulfilled her goal. Bread for the City, a D.C. nonprofit that provides vulnerable residents of the District with comprehensive social, physical and health services, exemplifies this story structure in many of

their online stories, including one entitled “[How We Helped LeJuan Find a Place to Call Home](#).”

While it’s certainly great to have these stories in your nonprofit’s portfolio, it’s not the only structure you can use in your storytelling.

Five choices to help vary the trajectory of your stories:

1. **Where and when to start the story**—in present day, in the past, or the future?
2. **The time sequence**—linear (progressing in order through time), or utilizing flashbacks or flash forwards?
3. **Pacing**—how quickly will you get into the action? Will you drop the reader/viewer into a situation quickly, or provide a slower, more deliberate build-up that allows for more exposition and character development? ([This provocative video](#) from WaterAid is an example of dropping the viewer into the action quickly; many of the questions about who the character is and what she is doing aren’t answered until the very end.)
4. **Resolution**—will the story have an ending, or will you leave it unresolved? (Thus allowing for opportunities to create a series or revisit a particular story—like D.C. nonprofit Byte Back had the chance to do with [this updated success story](#) of a former student who is now a donor of the organization.)
5. **Setbacks, or no setbacks**—will you acknowledge missteps or failures on the part of the organization throughout the journey?



Source: heraldsun.com

The Century Foundation makes liberal use of non-traditional trajectory choices in its interactive, web-based story "[Finding Home: Voices of the Baltimore Housing Mobility Project](#)." In addition to being noteworthy for the ways in which it uses strong, compelling human voices to tell what is essentially a research and policy story (think tanks, foundations and advocacy organizations—take note!), it also jumps around in time to effectively draw readers in and keep them reading (starting in the present, but hinting that things weren't always that way).

Stories that are native to the web, in particular, can have great freedom and flexibility in structures—moving away from linear formats toward more non-linear storytelling that lets the user decide in which order different pieces of the story will be consumed. [This interactive story portal](#), documenting a Duke University pediatric cardiology project in Nicaragua in 2000, is a very early example of web-based, non-linear storytelling, in that there's more than one way to experience the different elements (multimedia, interactive maps, biographies, and more).



Source: Words Beats & Life / Stone Soup Films



3. Authenticity

Stories should show—rather than tell—the audience about the character’s transformation, using rich details and featuring the character’s own voice, devoid of jargon.

If the trajectory of a story is—as Ron Geatz noted previously—its skeleton, then authenticity is the meat that adds critical substance to those bones. Authenticity is what sustains the connection between your audience and your character throughout the story, and what ultimately compels them to follow through on your call-to-action. It’s what creates emotional resonance, which countless [studies have shown](#) is essential for successful fundraising. Appeal to the heart, and you’ll appeal to the wallet, so the saying goes.

But it can be difficult for organizations to capture and convey an authentic story, because authenticity—by its very nature—is not something that can be manufactured. Quite often, it comes down to choosing the right character, and knowing the right details and quotes to show—rather than tell—the journey or transformation.

FINDING YOUR VOICE

Whenever possible, allow your stories to be told from the character’s point of view, rather than the organization’s. (Note that your choice of perspective and your choice of hero are distinct; they can be the same, or different.) In our audit of 157 nonprofits’ online storytelling efforts, nearly 60 percent of stories were told in the third person—meaning narrated by someone other than the main character. It’s possible for a third-person story to be authentic, but to accomplish this the story typically makes liberal use of quotes in the character’s own voice.

“Personal stories are the most powerful,” says Bea Spadacini, a communications specialist and consultant for several NGOs and UN agencies. “It doesn’t matter where the teller and listener live; if it touches the human core, there is no need for interpretation or add-ons. The best way is to let the people speak for themselves with fewer filters in between.”

The beginning of [this video story](#), produced for D.C. nonprofit Words Beats & Life by Stone Soup Films, gives viewers an unfiltered view into the experiences and passions of one of their students. We are immediately dropped into the action, seeing as well as hearing as he talks not about the organization, but rather what he enjoys most about being a part of it. Imagine how different the beginning of this video would be if we instead heard the organization's executive director talking about how the young men they work with enjoy the challenges of "breaking."

There is an art and a science to interviewing your characters and giving them the trust and space they need to speak in their own voices. Often, the characters we select can feel pressure to stay "on message" and speak in the language they think we want to hear. But, with practice, most anyone can develop the skills to successfully guide an interview to get the kinds of quotes and details you need to make a story come alive.

IT'S ALL IN THE DETAILS

Authentic stories generally adhere to the principal of 'showing, not telling,' and this can be accomplished by focusing on details. In video terms, this would be considered "b roll"—shots of characters doing something, close-ups of specific features (like eyes or hands) while they're talking, or shots of the environment. And they can just as easily be shared in text, photo or audio stories as well.

"The most effective way to get people to support [your] work is to take them to scene," says Ron Geatz. "If you can't take them physically, you have to take them through a story."

A good rule of thumb is to try to engage as many of the five senses as you can. Describe the moment(s) that illustrate what life was like before your character's transformation. What did they feel like, sound like, smell like, look like and taste like? Then, describe moments that illustrate life after the transformation. If done well, you don't need to explicitly state that life has changed—it should be obvious in the juxtaposition of the moments.

Capital Area Asset Builders paints a picture of their main character in [this text story](#), noting:

*"...with tailor-tape slung over her shoulders and cornered, but certainly not intimidated, by several concurrent upholstering jobs **Pauline smiles and says confidently**, 'I feel like I can see through the clouds something is coming, I don't know what exactly is on the other side but I feel like it's good.'"*

By observing and noting simple things like body language and environmental cues during the interview, CAAB's storyteller was able to show the reader more about who Pauline is as a person and how she responds to adversity.

Sometimes, you can build an entire story around a particular sensory detail. Safe Shores – The DC Children's Advocacy Center [tells a story of siblings](#) who, with the support of the organization, were able to testify against an abusive family member. Their approach is novel in that it centers on a familiar item to many—a bag of Cheez-Its! The story effectively shares how "the shiny, red bag filled with orange-colored baked squares" is a symbol of Safe Shores' support of the children.

Thinking Like a Reporter: How to Make the Most of Your Interviews

- The interviewer matters. Try to select someone who has a relationship with the subject already, so that there will be a level of comfort and trust built in. (This is especially important with children.)
- The longer the question is, the shorter the answer will tend to be. Try to keep your questions brief and open-ended.
- Ask throwaway questions (about the weather, what they ate for breakfast, what they did over the weekend, etc.). This will give you an opportunity to build rapport, and—more importantly—the space to observe and record details about the environment you’re in, the subject’s body language and personality and other sensory details. These can all be incorporated into your stories to create a more vivid character and a stronger sense of place.
- Begin your questions with verbs like describe, explain or tell.
- Try not to create broad or compound questions that can overwhelm your subject. (e.g. “In the past year, you’ve gone from being homeless to having a job and a home. What’s that been like?”)
- Ask for memories, and follow up with questions that incorporate the five senses. What did it feel like? What did it smell like? [This video story](#) produced by So Others Might Eat is a terrific example of the kinds of rich details you can get by framing your questions around memories.
- If you start to hear your subjects using jargon or saying things that he or she thinks you want to hear, don’t be afraid ask them to rephrase their answer or prompt them with a question that focuses more on their personal thoughts or experiences.
- You likely only have one chance to collect the details you’ll need, so more is always better.
- Think on your feet, and be prepared to capture in other media than you may have planned. [This video story](#), created by Friendship Place, was what the organization calls a ‘happy accident.’ They had intended to capture photos and write down quotes, but the organization’s communication assistant recognized—and seized—the opportunity to turn on a video camera and record an authentic story of impact (and friendship!).

Capturing Details Across Media

Details can be easily collected and shared regardless of the choice of story format (video, audio, photos or text).



Video

B roll: action shots, close-ups of people or things, establishing shots of locations



Audio

Ambient sounds of locations (room noise, weather); distinctive sounds of places (doors opening/closing, bells chiming, alarm clocks)



Photos

Close-up shots of people or things; unique angles or vantage points (looking into/out of a door or window; from behind, above or below)



Text

Descriptions of the surroundings; physical characteristics, body language or actions of your characters

BANISHING JARGON

Even if a story allows characters to speak in their own voices and shares rich sensory details, it can still feel inauthentic if it contains any of the typical jargon that we all use daily in describing our work in the nonprofit sector.

How do you know if your story contains jargon? Be on the lookout for acronyms, words like ‘interventions,’ ‘core competencies,’ ‘accountability,’ or anything on [this comprehensive list](#) from the Communications Network. Also avoid anything generated by this (part humorous, part scary) [Philanthropy Jargon Generator](#). Make sure that your characters have names, not just titles—even if those names need to be changed for privacy reasons.

In addition to looking out for obvious uses of jargon, also consider how your language choice impacts the way your audience perceives your characters.

“Too often we tell stories without considering the narrative of our organization or our audience, which can feed uncomfortable stereotypes, lead to a sense of disconnect, or contribute to a subtle us-vs.-them dynamic” (Horsey, 2012, p. 8).

Consider the implications of using phrases like “those in need,” “fight against,” and others that imply a victim in need of rescuing. Instead, many organizations opt for more collaborative verbs like empowering, partnering, or supporting (Horsey, 2012).

Perhaps one of the easiest ways to ensure that there’s no jargon in your story is to eliminate the typical talking head-style recitation of the organization’s mission statement all together.

“You don’t need to get the mission statement in there,” says Cara Jones, founder of Storytellers for Good, “because the message is already woven into [it] in a more personal, subtle and powerful way as a result of being in the form of a story.”



4. Action-Oriented Emotions

Stories should convey emotions that move people to act, and marry these with clear, easy-to-find pathways to get them to those desired actions.

Slightly more than 75 percent of the organizations surveyed indicated that they have a concrete goal or purpose for the stories they collect and share, with the primary goals being fundraising (60%) and raising awareness (25%).

However, this sense of purpose isn't always translated into concrete calls-to-action in the stories themselves, resulting in missed opportunities for even the most engaging content. Among the organizations analyzed in the online story audit, nearly 68 percent of stories were successful in conveying a call-to-action, either in the story itself or in the presentation of the story (clearly displayed alongside it on the page, for example). The most common call-to-action was donate (77%), followed by volunteer (50%), with sharing the story in a distant third place (5%).

So if, as a storyteller, you have a concrete purpose and this purpose is clearly translated into a concrete call-to-action, how can you boost the odds of your audience actually following through on that call-to-action? The answer, as we've seen in fundraising research, lies in your ability to stimulate people's

emotions. Specifically, you want your stories to be framed in terms of what we call action-oriented emotions.

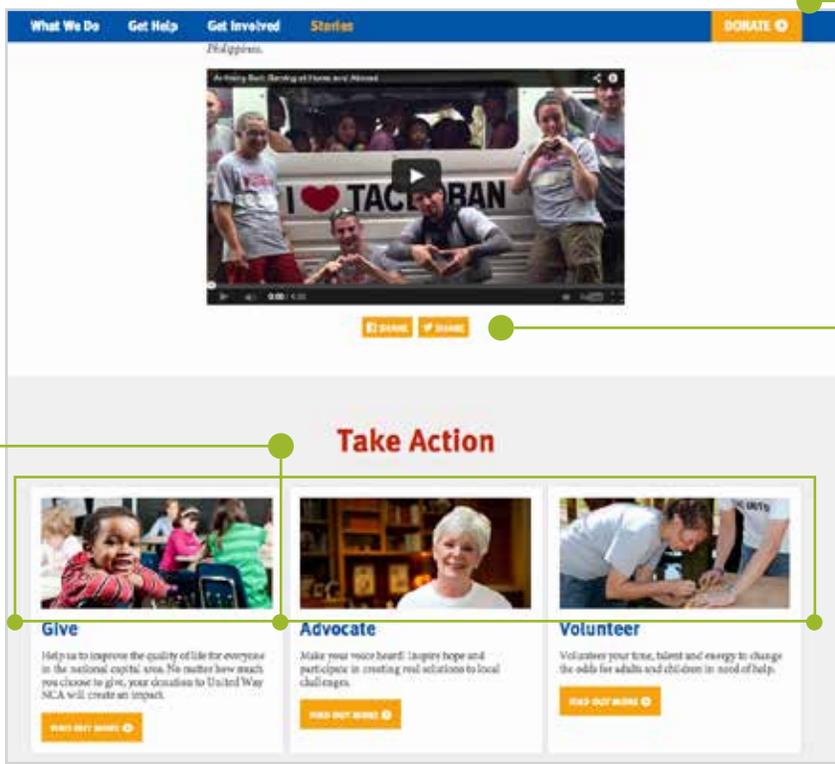
Guidance on what makes an emotion "action-oriented" or not can be found in the book *Contagious: Why Things Catch On*, by Jonah Berger. In it, Berger focuses on what makes online content go viral (which is something we all hope for our nonprofit stories, however small the likelihood!).

In particular, he has isolated a single characteristic of the emotions that make someone want to do something (like share an online article)—physiological arousal. This, he says, is the difference between a story that makes you feel sad, and one that makes you feel angry; you'll want to act after reading the anger-inducing one.

"Some emotions, like anger and anxiety, are high-arousal. Take excitement. When we feel excited, we want to do something rather than sit still. The same is true for awe. When inspired by awe we can't help wanting to tell people what happened. Other emotions, however, have the opposite effect: they stifle action" (Berger, 2013, p. 109).

Online Storytelling With Action: United Way NCA

United Way of the National Capital Area clearly shows what a big difference it can make if your calls-to-action are accessible, diverse and designed for engagement.



1 The “Donate” call remains static in the upper right corner as the user scrolls through the different components of the multimedia story.

2 After reaching the bottom of the story, the user immediately has the option of sharing on social media, using one-click, pre-populated Facebook and Twitter posts.

3 Finally, the user is prompted to “Take Action” via three choices (Give, Advocate and Volunteer) – each of which is paired with an image, a short paragraph of descriptive copy, and a link to find out more.

The following chart summarizes the differences between common emotions in storytelling.

	HIGH AROUSAL	LOW AROUSAL
POSITIVE	Awe Excitement Amusement/Humor	Contentment
NEGATIVE	Anger Anxiety	Sadness

Source: Berger, 2013

The popular [Humans of New York](#) project has cornered the market on simple, visual stories that inspire, surprise, amuse, frustrate—and provoke hundreds of thousands of shares. The example here is just one of the many action-oriented stories they tell each day.

Humans of New York
Yesterday

"We were a two career family. I was a nuclear engineer. I designed shields for the fuel reactors on the first nuclear submarines. He was a carpenter."



Like · Comment · Share 8,254 Shares

223,009 people like this. Top Comments ▾



5. A Hook

Stories should capture the audience's attention as quickly as possible, giving them a sense of whose story it is and what's at stake.

It seems the attention span of the average Internet user is lower than ever, if popular statistics about viewing and reading habits are to be believed. Consider the following:

According to [a 2010 study by Visible Measures](#), 20 percent of video viewers abandon watching after the first 10 seconds; this grows to 44 percent who abandon after 60 seconds.

In [a 2008 study](#), Nielsen Norman Group found that users of an average web page read at most 28 percent of the words on the page during an average visit.

And since both of these studies were published, the web has only gotten more complex, giving users exponentially greater choices of content to consume.

It's clear that, as storytellers, we need to provide something compelling in those first 10 seconds or 28 percent of the text on the page. What we need is a hook.

According to Lisa Cron, author of the book *Wired for Story* (2012), a hook can indicate “all is not as it seems...that something is about to change (and not necessarily for the better). Simply put, [it provides] a reason to care” (p. 13).

Cron's definition of a solid narrative hook includes three questions that must be immediately answered for your audience (p. 17):

- Whose story is it?
- What's happening?
- What's at stake?

Consider the earlier example from The Century Foundation's Finding Home story of Baltimore's housing mobility project (see the accompanying screenshot on the next page). We immediately know whose story it is (Kimberly's); what's happening (she's in her suburban home, likely right before her children's bedtime); and what's at stake (she hasn't always been in that home).

Or, recall the mysterious and provocative [WaterAid video](#). We know it's the story of a woman who has woken up in the middle of the night with some sort of a dire need. The mystery (of knowing something is clearly at stake, but not exactly what that something is) keeps us watching through the end of the two-minute video.

UNCOVERING YOUR HOOKS

Often when we're constructing stories, the hook is there—you just need to do a little reframing of the content in order to make sure that you lead with it. Take this story of Ed, a volunteer for the Literacy Council of Montgomery County, for example:

“I became an original member of the team that developed the Literacy Council's English for Daily Living program, which sponsors classes in Montgomery County schools for parents of elementary school students. I volunteered in the classes as a teacher assistant and site coordinator, sponsored summer school conversation clubs, and then initiated a 'next steps' program that helped students identify additional learning opportunities. My maternal grandparents came from Russia to a world in which there

Kimberly

Baltimore Suburbs. Present Day.

A young, African American woman sits nervously at her dining room table inside a modest, two-story house. The front of her house is adorned with rosebushes and a wraparound porch. On the inside, old, slightly stained carpeting spans the floors and few furnishings decorate the walls.

Kimberly is the type of woman who greets even casual acquaintances with a hug. If you have the time, she has many stories to tell, particularly about her daughters and her half-sister, whom Kimberly also raised. Their names are tattooed on Kimberly's upper arm so they are with her at all times.



- My mom got me into the public housing system. I don't want that for my children. I do not want them to be part of the system.

- KIMBERLY

Kimberly stands up, stretches, and walks to the kitchen. In the middle of the room stands a small island. Kimberly can often be found hunched over it making minced meat. French doors allow a glimpse at a fenced-in backyard. The bathroom is decorated with a matching shower curtain, bath mats, and towels for company. The upstairs bedrooms await sleepy children.

The scene outside is not that of a never-ending high-rise, but of a quiet, suburban neighborhood. Thanks to the Baltimore Housing Mobility Program, Kimberly's family, and thousands of others, can experience a new way of life away from the high-poverty neighborhoods of their past.

Source: tcf.org

If it's not a story, then what is it?

Of the 355 “stories” we analyzed across more than 150 nonprofits’ websites, 54 percent were deemed stories according to our criteria (i.e., possessing each of the five essential building blocks). Often, organizations will label content like event recaps, profiles or testimonials as stories. It’s not uncommon to find a page on an organization’s website with the title “Stories of Impact” that contains no actual stories! With a little tweaking, these other types of content can be crafted into stories. The graphic below summarizes what’s missing from each of the common types of non-story content.

CONTENT TYPE	 EFFECTIVE CHARACTER	 TRAJECTORY	 AUTHENTICITY	 ACTION-ORIENTED EMOTIONS	 HOOK
STORY	X	X	X	X	X
INTERVIEW	X		X		
PROFILE	X	X	X		
EVENT RECAP		X			
TESTIMONIAL	X			X	

was no LCMC and yet they had to succeed. Maybe my family has come full cycle by me helping current-day immigrants succeed as well. I am proud that in two generations we went from being immigrants to helping today's immigrants.” (Source)

One potentially intriguing hook for Ed’s story might be his family connection—that his grandparents came from Russia to a community and needed the support of an organization like LCMC, and how that inspired him to give back. Just by reframing the existing content, the first sentence of his story could be:

“My maternal grandparents came from Russia to a world in which there was no Literacy Council of Montgomery County.”

Right away, we know what’s at stake here—and we have an immediate sense of the importance of LCMC’s mission, without needing to explicitly state what that mission is.

In a perfect world, when interviewing Ed or any of your other characters, you’ll be on the lookout for anecdotes or memories that would make for a strong hook—which will give you the opportunity to ask more questions in the moment and to gather sensory details to flesh them out more fully.



View our [Story Building Blocks online worksheet](#) for a quick summary of each of the five building blocks.

STORIES WORTH TELLING

The Strategic Story Cycle

Recall our earlier statistic on having a concrete purpose for each story: slightly more than 75 percent of the organizations surveyed as part of this research stated that this is the case.

But having a purpose for your stories is just one piece of a strategic approach to storytelling. A truly strategic approach encompasses planning for stories—allowing the purpose to drive key choices for how the story will be produced, shared and measured, as well as how stories fit in with overall communication and organizational objectives. It involves coordinated systems of sharing information inside the organization—making

sure that efforts are consistent and aligned toward meeting those objectives.

Developing a strategic approach to storytelling is cyclical. Successes can strengthen investment and focus efforts for each future story. We divide the strategic story cycle into four steps: planning, production, distribution and evaluation.

Strategic Story Cycle Diagram



Planning

The most successful storytelling organizations today invest a lot of time and energy into the upfront planning process—and with good reason. Sound planning can lead to more efficient, effective use of resources (both time and money) and more targeted, focused stories that in turn have better returns on that investment. It can also lead to a more proactive, rather than reactive, use of story assets over time—knowing how content can be repurposed and perhaps re-edited to get the most out of each individual story.

The planning phase aims to provide overall direction to the following phases, by answering key questions about to whom the story is targeted, the intended outcomes of into developing it. These choices dictate how it will be produced and shared.

There are several tools that can aid in organizational story planning:

- **Editorial calendars**, for determining overall content needs and themes for a given period of time (yearly, quarterly, monthly).
- **Dedicated meeting time**, for discussing and sharing departmental story needs across communications, fundraising, programs and leadership—as well as educating/training on what makes a good story.
- **Organizational story in-take forms**, for suggesting stories or characters that align with content needs and themes.
- **Internal story bank**, for cataloguing and saving stories that can be accessed by individuals across the organization (for more on this, see the Production section on p. 31).

“At weekly staff meetings and in monthly reports, staff are asked to share any good stories they have heard or learned about in their daily interactions. One challenge with this system is that there are some site managers who aren’t natural storytellers, and aren’t able to pull the details that would be necessary to make those stories work for particular audiences like donors or volunteers. That’s where the communications staff and executive director are helpful—if there’s a particular kind of story they are looking for, they can alert staff at the four sites.”

Jamila Larson,
Homeless Children’s Playtime Project

WHEN TO ASK FOR OUTSIDE HELP

An important consideration early on in the planning process is whether to enlist the help of outside professionals, either paid or pro bono. This is largely dependent on both the existing skills within the organization and the resources available. When considering the overall investment into internal vs. external resources, the following summary of benefits and challenges can help to guide decision-making.

	PROS	CONS
INTERNAL STAFF	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Appropriate when producing ongoing, regular content that requires regular editing and support.• Access to and rapport with story subjects is often good.• Long-term abilities to revisit and repurpose story content.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Can be difficult to allocate/justify time.• High cost of acquiring and maintaining necessary technology, equipment, and training and development.• Skills and confidence impact quality of stories.
EXTERNAL PROFESSIONALS	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Expertise leads to efficiency in capturing the best content.• Broad understanding of constraints and potential solutions.• Outsider perspective valuable in simplifying complex missions.• Can provide broader exposure via relationships with media and other networks.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Cost.• Requires guidance and oversight from organization for best results.• Long-term edits or updates need to be contracted for, adding time and money.• Tricky to build relationships with unknown story subjects quickly.

EXPERT OPINIONS:

How do you select the right medium for telling your story? What factors contribute to this decision?



**BEATRICE SPADACINI,
COMMUNICATIONS SPECIALIST & CONSULTANT:**

The choice depends on a client's resources but there is no requirement to spend a huge amount of money to tell a powerful story. In new media, print alone is not powerful enough no matter how good a writer you are. Putting together a story with multimedia is the way to go; audio stories combine narrative, visuals and local music or sounds that contextualize the country or culture.



**JIM STIPE,
CATHOLIC RELIEF SERVICES:**

Lack of advance story planning means the communications team can end up having to react to whatever content comes in to them and trying to work out what can they can do with it. I would love to move toward planning the content ahead of time and then going to gather it, but this takes time and money. With enough advanced planning like knowing where someone is going in three months, the organization could plan to fit story gathering into their trip mission. This coordination aspect can be a challenge, especially for larger organizations. Plus, with field challenges especially in emergencies, the staff are always reacting by default.



**ROGER BURKS,
ONLINE COMMUNICATIONS OFFICER, WORLD BANK**

A written story with some very engaging photos (or simply a well-sequenced photo series) needs to be the bulk of what nonprofits have on their website, as it can demonstrate depth and breadth of work and make a personal connection while being at the less technical end of the continuum.

Video does offer a lot of bang for the buck. It can join together the visual plus a well-written script of a story in an amazing way, but the big caveat is you have do it right. If done properly, video is probably the best storytelling format, but it takes lots of resources to do effectively – time, financial, professional training, etc. Photo essays are a sweet spot between the written story and video. You can use longer captions to tell the story in a compelling way. You can turn photo essays into videos. Mercy Corps built a successful year-end appeal using photo/video montages.

DIVERSIFYING YOUR STORIES

An additional benefit to planning stories in advance is that it allows you to be more intentional in varying the types of stories you tell about your organization's work.

"It is tempting to keep sending out the standard story—victim had a problem, organization saved the day, now life is better," says Roger Burks, online communications officer at the World Bank and co-founder of Pictographers. "The risk is that audiences will get bored. When you demonstrate a range of stories, you show the full continuum of your organization's work—even including the less successful efforts and what you learned from them."

In addition, experts caution against allowing one story (or type of story) to represent an entire population. Multiple stories allow for multiple voices and perspectives that better represent the complexity of issues and balance the impacts on communities.

The trick in avoiding both story fatigue and the danger of a single representative viewpoint is to aim for diversity.

Diversity can be achieved in a combination of ways:

1. Story type

There are many different ways to categorize the types of story nonprofits can tell. Some say there are [six essential types](#); others [identify three](#); and still others [prefer five](#).

For the purposes of our research, we categorized the online stories we analyzed into three types: **on the ground**, which shows the impact of the organization on the lives of those it serves; **behind the scenes**, which shows how the organization accomplishes its mission (often featuring internal heroes);

and **broader issue**, which focuses on the issue itself and may not even mention the organization explicitly—instead, it makes the case for the need for intervention.

Varying the type of story being told is one of the most straightforward ways to achieve diversity, as well as to ensure that your stories cover the spectrum of your work—from why the organization exists, to its founding, to how the mission is accomplished both internally and externally.

2. Character choice

Rather than defaulting to always featuring a client or beneficiary as the main character, many organizations tell stories of other individuals whose lives have been impacted in some way. Consider featuring staff, volunteers, board members, donors, supporters, community members or other key stakeholders.

3. Issue dimension/portrayal

Organizations address extremely complex issues today—ones that have many dimensions. Consider an issue like poverty. Organizations that address poverty likely have multiple services aimed at different facets of the issue: job training, health care, food security, access to education, and housing, among others. Rather than trying to address all of these sub-issues and interventions in one story, focus on just one dimension and one specific program. You'll have more stories to tell, and they will be simpler for your audience to understand and to act on.

4. Call-to-action

Donate, volunteer, sign a petition, share, learn more, sign up for a mailing list, attend an event—these, among many others, are things that organizations can ask their audiences to do upon reading or watching a story. The call-to-action can be varied both in the content of the

story itself (often in conjunction with the choice of character; telling the story of a volunteer can lead to a logical volunteer call-to-action, for example), or in the presentation (the elements, links and other information that are placed alongside an online story).

5. Production format/medium

While story formats can vary widely in terms of resources and time required to produce them, it's a good rule of thumb to utilize different types of media across your overall storytelling efforts. Video, audio, a series of photos or an individual image, text stories, or any combination of these can be utilized—and not producing too many of one type will keep audiences engaged.

6. Plot devices utilized

Perhaps one story will follow a typical linear path and will resolve neatly, while another will leap forward and/or backward in time and will have an open-ended conclusion. Try to avoid using the same plot patterns for each story to keep viewers and readers guessing.

The following chart is a hypothetical diversity plan for an organization, examining two different stories across each of the different choices.

	STORY ONE	STORY TWO
STORY TYPE	On the Ground	Broader Issue
CHARACTER CHOICE	Volunteer	A Family in the Community
ISSUE DIMENSION	Job Skills Training	Housing
CALL TO ACTION	Volunteer	Share
PRODUCTION FORMAT	Text/Photos	Video
PLOT DEVICES	None; Linear, Resolves	Open-ended; Doesn't Resolve

SUMMARY: KEY PLANNING STAGE QUESTIONS

- How does this story fit in with your overall communications strategy for the year?
- What are the other content needs of the communications/fundraising/program staff that can be met while collecting and producing this story?
- Who is the target audience of this story?
- What's the purpose? What do you want your audience to do after viewing/reading/ experiencing this story?
- How will the story be shared? On which platforms and in which media?
- What is the budget for this story?
- Who will be producing the story? In-house or outside expertise?
- How can this story contribute to the diversity of your overall storytelling?

IN THEIR OWN WORDS:

How Catholic Relief Services Plans Stories for Multiple Audiences



Working for Catholic Relief Services' regional field office in East Africa, Sara Fajardo exemplifies a strategic approach to storytelling on an individual level. She uses an editorial calendar to guide some story themes but also regularly looks at the goals for both for her region and the agency as a whole. Fajardo has several roles to play – she is the storyteller, the media representative and often leads internal communications as well. She constantly checks with key internal stakeholders, such as CRS's major gift officers, asking them what's on their horizon they are promoting.

"I'm aware of the big grants we have in the region," Fajardo explains of her multi-faceted approach. "I'm looking at media trends; I'm looking at which are the priority countries. For example we have this USAID grant, so we want to tell some of the stories around this because we want to keep that donor happy. Or we may be pushing certain things on the Hill."

Whenever she recognizes how a specific story could be used for advocacy on the Hill, she checks in with the CRS advocacy team and asks them, "Are there certain words or phrases I should include in this story so that it works for your purposes?" It might be as simple as including three very specific words and then it becomes useful for them.

It's also vital to Fajardo to make her storytelling efforts worthwhile by maximizing her time as well as the field staff's time. "If you are going to spend a week with already overworked program officers, you want to make sure what you create will make as big an impact as possible," she says. She makes sure to shop an idea around with as many diverse audiences as possible before going out into the field.

"I look for all those commonalities and try to select my stories based on those different factors. It's not an exact science, but I am always as aware as possible of all the diverse audiences that my stories can be used for," Fajardo explains.

Catholic Relief Services is in the process of streamlining their messaging by designing a more strategic organization-wide approach that better coordinates competing considerations, similar to what Fajardo accomplishes on an individual level.

"Previously it has been a 'let a thousand flowers bloom approach' with many people doing many things," says longtime CRS photo editor Jim Stipe. "Great stories and messages can come of this, but we are now thinking 'let's rope in those flowers and make one big bouquet.'" He believes the organization will benefit from a more strategic approach but recognizes that this can be difficult to do.

Production

The production phase can be broken into two parts: collection of story assets, and the creation of stories using these assets.

COLLECTION

If we were to pinpoint one area in which the organizations featured in this research had the most questions, it's likely the collection process. Namely, how can stories be collected more efficiently and comprehensively—ensuring that the details and information necessary to tell an engaging story are fully gathered while minimizing the time necessary to accomplish this?

Our survey and interviews uncovered a potential disconnect in the ways in which organizations are currently collecting their stories. Almost universally, organizations rely on program staff knowledge to gather stories, though the department overseeing the storytelling process is split between fundraising/development (54%) and marketing/communications (42%). Survey respondents report low levels of satisfaction with the quantity of stories being produced each year (at only 23 percent), as well as cite “collecting stories more easily” as the number one area in which their organizations’ storytelling could be improved (61%).

Some organizations, like Cornerstones, Inc. (formerly Reston Interfaith), formally ask program staff to collect stories and save them on a shared drive. For CollegeTracks, this process is similar but takes place at the end of each year, when staff are asked to recall good stories they may have encountered

throughout that year and submit them for use during the following year. Doorways for Women and Families takes a different approach—tasking a grant writer with sitting in on client meetings and recording stories from the client service staff. For many others, collection remains a somewhat ad hoc process, and as a result stories are reactive and sometimes missing key details needed to authentically convey the character’s journey.

In general, there are three different models of story collection that organizations can employ: staff collection, beneficiary/client produced, and crowdsourcing.

TIPS FOR STAFF COLLECTION

- Create a rough storyboard in advance, and use this to guide what kinds of assets you’ll need (specific quotes, photo or video shots, audio sound bites).
- Simplify the process by which story assets are transferred to the staff members overseeing the creation and sharing, by standardizing intake forms and creating an easy-to-use story bank.
- Offer training on interviewing skills and software/equipment so that program staff can gain skills and confidence.
- Make sure that staff know to ask for releases for story subjects, and that the standard release form is accessible.
- Always share stories internally, so that staff from all different areas can learn and develop their own ears for stories.

THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY:

Teaching for Change's Template for Success

After attending a spring 2014 training in conjunction with the Stories Worth Telling project, Allyson Criner Brown, associate director and Tellin' Stories program manager at Teaching for Change, developed a standard template that both program participants and staff could use to flesh out and record the stories they had been previously sharing and exchanging on a more ad hoc basis verbally. After leading staff through a training on the fundamentals of a story, Criner Brown encouraged them to use the template to jot down details about the universal needs of their character, their body language and facial expressions, character traits that stand out, and other experiences and examples that make their stories come alive.



Source: Teaching for Change / Flickr

Orr Elementary parents host Councilmember and Education Committee chair David Catania on Wednesday, March 19, 2014. Parents shared their stories and gave Mr. Catania a tour of the building, which badly needs modernization.

“Before the training, we struggled to turn the report of ‘what happened’ into a story,” Criner Brown shared. “With the template, we emphasize that everything now has to be told from the viewpoint of one person.”

Once a month, she uses regular meeting time to give staff the opportunity to reflect upon and record a story using the template, which she is then able to use to create stories that are posted on Teaching for Change’s website. “It provided structure for everyone to be on the same page and to think about telling our story in the same way,” she said.

On the participant side, the storytelling template has been instrumental in allowing parents to have their voices heard on one of the organization’s current key issues: a grassroots campaign to modernize D.C.’s Orr Elementary School. Criner Brown and her staff led parents of the school through an activity using the same story templates that staff use, and the resulting testimonials (which were **presented to D.C. Council members and the Education Committee**) were moving accounts of the real life impact of the crumbling facilities. The parent stories were a key part of the campaign’s success, Criner Brown said—which has led to the Mayor **more than doubling** the previously allocated budget to modernize the school, and to \$3 million being set aside to begin the planning process as quickly as the next fiscal year.

Tweet your own photos of courage to @CARE with hashtag #IAmCourage. We'll choose the best ones to display below!

TWEET YOUR PHOTO




What's Your Idea of Courage?

If you could capture courage in a photograph, what would it look like? Perhaps it's someone standing up for what they believe in despite the opposition. Or someone overcoming their biggest fear to become a stronger person.

The idea of "courage" has different meanings to different people – and we want you to show us what it means to you.

Source: care.org

TIPS FOR BENEFICIARY/CLIENT PRODUCED

- Be transparent about how the content (whether it's poetry or other writing, a photo or video s/he created) will be used and how the creator will be credited.
- Create simple mechanisms to capture stories in ways that users are familiar and comfortable with. (For example, SMYAL created a terrific [online story collection tool](#) to gather stories from program alumni, which led to the development of an [online collection](#) in honor of its 30th anniversary.)
- Don't use the word "story"! It can be too ambiguous a term to get the kind of actionable content you want. As SMYAL did, ask for memories, experiences, or feelings instead.

TIPS FOR CROWDSOURCING

Crowdsourced stories can be single photos, Tweets, short videos or any other content that the general community can contribute to or about your organization. [CARE's #iamcourage campaign](#) is a good example of crowdsourced storytelling. Note that crowdsourced stories are different

from client-submitted in that there's no organizational filter—stories are generally consumed immediately.

Be aware of (and plan for) the risks of publicly asking for stories (via a hashtag, for example) that the organization does not have full control of.

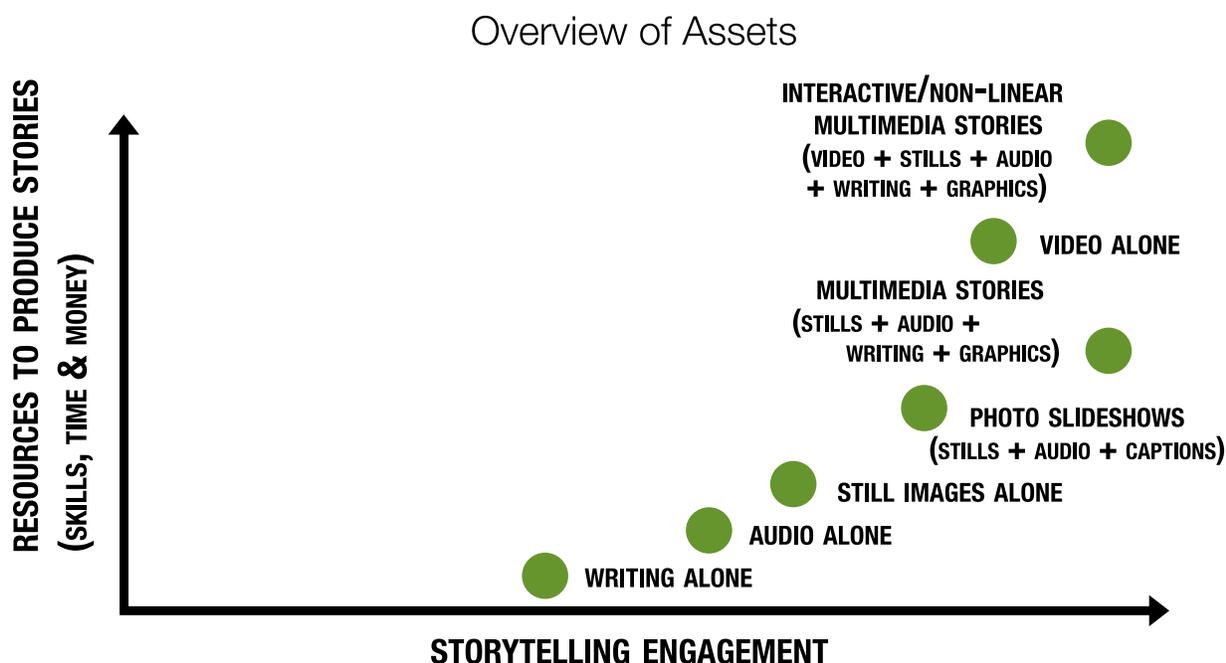
- Make the "ask" very simple—an image, a short Tweet, etc.—around a topic that people are willing to share and talk about.
- Be transparent about how stories will be used and/or judged, especially if there is a contest or voting involved.
- Develop plans for repurposing all of the content that flows in as a result of the crowdsourcing request. Crowdsourcing can be a very efficient way to gather lots of content quickly—but know that the quality will vary significantly.
- Cross-promote your requests for crowdsourced content in all your communications channels—in the e-newsletter, on the website, in print, in person—not just on the social media ones that are a part of the campaign.

CREATION

The format in which a story is told is an important choice. Compelling stories can be told across a variety of different media, but a one-size-fits-all approach is generally not the most effective. Ideally, organizations approach the collection process having planned to gather a variety of story assets at once, which can then be combined in multiple ways to tell stories in words, in images and in video.

In our analysis of online storytelling, text stories were by far the most common, comprising nearly 60 percent of the stories we found. Surprisingly (given the investment required), videos were the second most common, at 39 percent. Far more rare were photo stories and multimedia stories. The latter, in particular, is a missed opportunity to create relatively low cost, highly engaging content.

The figure below summarizes the relative costs and engagement of each particular story format.



The underutilized “sweet spots” for many organizations are interactive images and multimedia stories. [This multimedia story](#), by D.C. nonprofit Step Afrika!, demonstrates how effective this format can be—competing with video at a fraction of the production costs. Similarly, [this interactive image](#), produced by Doctors Without Borders’ UK chapter, is a low cost, engaging way to showcase multiple pieces of a story that have already been produced.

Ultimately, when pulling together the various assets of your story, let the story itself guide you in determining the best format. Different types of stories are more appropriate for different media. The figure below summarizes some of these key differences, along with where to look for more information and low cost production tools.

FORMAT	BEST FOR...*	FURTHER RESOURCES	LOW COST TOOLS
WRITTEN NARRATIVE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • History, background • Complex explanations • Biographical facts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Andy Goodman 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • --
IMAGES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Capturing a moment or emotion • Distinctive characters or places (<i>who/what</i> they are) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seeing is Believing (Resource Media) • PhotoPhilanthropy • CSIC's Nonprofit Imagery Guide 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mobile shooting/editing (iPhone): • ProCamera • Camera+ • Instagram
AUDIO	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Capturing emotions • Setting a mood • Capturing distinct characteristics of places or people 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • kdmcBerkeley's audio tutorials 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Audacity (editing) • Garageband (editing)
VIDEO	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Action, movement • Personality, charisma, humor • Children, animals • Distinctive characters or places (<i>how</i> they are) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Into Focus (See3, Edelman, YouTube) • YouTube's Playbook for Good • MediaStorm Field Guide 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • iMovie • Instagram/Vine • Mobile shooting/editing: FiLMiC Pro (iPhone)
MULTIMEDIA (PHOTOS + AUDIO)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Capturing moments and emotions • Providing broader context through use of on-screen text 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • MediaStorm Field Guide 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Soundslides • ThingLink

*Adapted from <http://multimedia.journalism.berkeley.edu/tutorials/picking-right-media-reporting-story>

THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY:

Literacy Lab's 2014 Volunteer "Thank You" Video

From start to finish, the Literacy Lab's "thank you" video for its volunteer tutors serves to highlight—in an authentic, engaging way—the impact of their time on the lives of the children they work with each day. It's a rare example of successfully making the viewer (in this case, the volunteer tutor) the true "hero" and main character of the story. The use of data at the beginning provides context, and the creative, unexpected setup of one child interviewing another at the very beginning serves as an effective "hook" to draw the viewer in.



Source: The Literacy Lab / YouTube

Throughout the video, we hear unfiltered voices of the children, and we see details and actions that provide a nice visual counterpoint to these mini testimonials.

Literacy Lab's co-executive director Tom Dillon offered up some insights into the process of planning, creating and sharing the video story.

What was your goal in creating and sharing the 'thank you' video story?

The goal in creating the video was to provide a surprise for our tutors at their year-end graduation celebration from their year in the Metro DC Reading Corps program. We were hoping (and think we succeeded!) in having the video serve as the emotional climax of what we wanted to be a moving ceremony focusing on the impact that their work had over the course of the year...a sort of "oh my goodness, I did that!" moment. As a very data-driven organization, it was also a moment for us to show the softer, not-so-quantifiable impact of our work.

Can you briefly describe the production process?

We were lucky enough to have a good friend who is a documentary filmmaker who was passing through town and offered to put a video together for us. It took us a full day to get the footage from several different schools around the area. We got a total of about three

hours of footage. The editing took another couple of hours, with a final hour spent with two members of our staff going over each step of the video with the filmmaker and tweaking it.

Collecting footage always takes longer than we think it will, but this can be planned for. The biggest wild card is always the children; it's impossible to know if one will be able to get good interview footage with useful comments from the kids.

How did you approach your interviews with the children?

We had two keys to this:

1) Character Choice: Our tutors had worked with their children all year long, so we could ask for their advice about which children would be most comfortable on camera.

2) Interviewer Choice: I did the interviews. I think the key is having someone doing the interviews who is experienced in working with kids – i.e., not a film crew in which the cameraman (with no education experience) is asking questions of a six-year-old. Kids tend not to respond well to that, and the adults often don't have a good sense for what sorts of questions to ask children.

How has the video been received, both internally and externally? Has it met your initial goal(s)?

The video has been very well received and met the goals we had for it. Internally, I think that our whole team found the video very motivating and a reminder of why we do what we do. Externally, I think it helped convey to a large audience what it is that we do and provide visual images for what can sometimes be a pretty dry description (one-on-one, data-driven reading intervention).

Tom's Key Storytelling Takeaways:

- 1) Have a vision and purpose for what one wants the video to accomplish*
- 2) Work with a talented filmmaker*
- 3) Get good interviews with the kids*

STORY BANKING

Having a centralized place to store your stories is important for several reasons. From a process standpoint, it can allow for ease in transferring stories from those collecting, to those producing, to those sharing. It encourages consistency in branding, as well as measuring and reporting on story successes. And, it can contribute to a greater organizational appreciation for stories—since everyone knows where and how to find them.

Setting up a story bank doesn't need to be difficult. At a minimum, a story bank needs to function as a shared system for cataloguing and accessing stories and story assets. It can also allow for tracking and reporting when stories are shared, recording outcomes, and other features—but these shouldn't interfere with the intended purposes of easy storage and access.

When designing your organization's story bank, there are a few things to keep in mind:

- Design it with the end user in mind. How will s/he be searching for stories? How can file structures, names and/or tags make this process easy?
- Encourage consistent naming practices across all users. Develop a short “read me” file or guide to inform users of how to add and name content.
- Utilize available technology, whether that's a shared hard drive, Google Drive, internal wikis, content management systems, databases, or other file systems currently in use.

SUMMARY: KEY PRODUCTION STAGE QUESTIONS

- What's your “wish-list” of assets to be collected? (rough story board)
- In what format? (audio – both interview and ambient sounds, photo, written notes/quotes, video footage)
- What key messages/themes are you hoping will be conveyed through the collected assets?
- How will you collect these assets? (Staff, beneficiary/client submissions, crowdsourcing/contests)
- How might you salvage material if there's human or technological error during the collection process?
- How will you catalogue/bank the assets collected?
- How will you adjust your “wish list”/story board based on the assets you've obtained?
- How will you catalogue/bank the finished stories?
- Can the stories be repurposed into multiple formats or for multiple channels?



For more tips, see our online [Designing a User-Friendly Story Bank worksheet](#), and watch our online [Video Tutorial on Structuring Your Story Bank](#).

Distribution

Nonprofits have many channels to choose from when deciding how to distribute their stories. While our research focused primarily on digital channels—websites, e-newsletters, social media and other publications found online—we recognize the importance (and effectiveness) of face-to-face storytelling as well.

One of the biggest advantages of in-person storytelling, whether it’s one-on-one or at an event, is the storyteller’s ability to tailor

specifically to the audience—because they are getting feedback in real time. The principle of tailoring stories can and should be applied to online storytelling as well, because users have very different expectations and consumption patterns across the different channels.

Survey respondents reported very different figures when asked to identify the channels they use to share stories and the effectiveness of those channels.

CHANNEL	USAGE FOR STORIES	EFFECTIVENESS
 WEBSITE	89%	57%
 E-NEWSLETTER	85%	65%
 FACEBOOK	73%	49%
 PRINTED COLLATERAL	73%	35%
 ANNUAL REPORTS	68%	42%
 TWITTER	53%	21%
 YOUTUBE	40%	15%
 LINKEDIN	11%	0%
 INSTAGRAM	7%	5%

Cornerstones, Inc., like many nonprofits, approaches modifying its stories for online channels in an ad hoc way, according to CEO Kerrie Wilson. “Our favorite storytelling channel is the e-newsletter,” she says. “It has transformed to be less about event updates and more about having consistent themes and impact statements and stories. We use Facebook and e-news to highlight donors who are helping to achieve successful events and to provide connection. The advocacy page on our website uses stories to help explain the issues.”

Knowing when and how to modify stories for a particular online platform can be a challenge, because the platforms themselves often change features and functionality over time. Facebook and Twitter, for example, have both undergone significant layout changes in recent months, which have changed how users see and engage with content.

In addition to tailoring content for specific channels, there are other ways to increase engagement with the stories your organization is posting online.

- Gather data on your supporters by looking at Facebook Insights, newsletter and website metrics. What kind of content resonates with them? Experiment

with different kinds of posts, measure the results, and incorporate the insights into your next story.

- Create excitement and buzz when launching new stories online. Equip staff, volunteers and social media supporters with sample Tweets and calls-to-action to share. Make it an event!
- Recognize when people share or contribute to online stories, both on social media and on your other communications channels. Thank supporters on your website or recognize them in your e-newsletter.
- Get mileage out of a single story by varying how you post it on a single channel multiple times.
- Utilize an editorial calendar to streamline the posting and tracking process.



Find out how to tailor stories for evolving online platforms by visiting our online [Social Media Platform Comparison Tool](#) and watching our online [Video Tutorial on Tailoring Online Content](#).

EXPERT OPINIONS:

What advice do you have when choosing the right channel for sharing your story?



JIM STIPE,

CATHOLIC RELIEF SERVICES:

Many organizations are asking the wrong question of new social media tools. Rather than having a mindset of missing out on what competitors are doing and then adopting all new tools, instead say “Let’s evaluate it, does it make sense for us right now?” Vine highlights the dilemma of storytelling in this age – it’s all backwards. Rather than having a good story and figuring out what are the ways that will tell it best, now we end up choosing tools first and trying to figure out how to squeeze something into it which really limits your story. It’s become not about the story, but about the tool.



RON GEATZ,

THE NATURE CONSERVANCY:

Most organizations look at their website as a way to tell whatever they want to share. But people come to a website for what they want to know. So ask ‘how can we stop just pushing out our message?’ and instead make the website more open to allow people to find stories that are appealing to them.



LAURA POHL,

PHOTOGRAPHER & FILMMAKER:

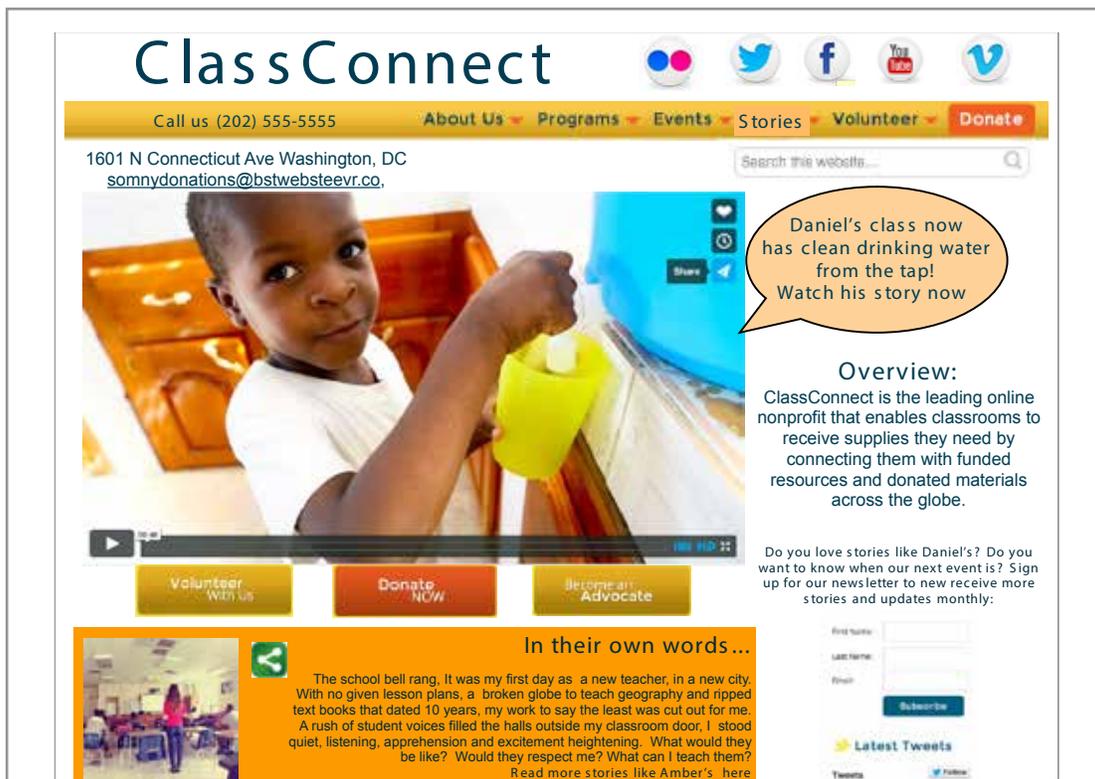
Organizations must have a plan for distributing their stories to ensure they get a return on whatever was invested to produce the stories. Part of our distribution plan at Bread for the World involved encouraging everyone to push out the story. The communications team would write sample Tweets and Facebook posts and send to staff involved with the story productions to provide easy content for updates they could send out to their own networks, including the freelancers hired and other staff, partners or participants.

HOME(PAGE) IS WHERE THE STORIES ARE

In our research, we paid particular attention to the nonprofit website as a tool for sharing stories. This was no accident—according to the [2014 Nonprofit Communications Trends report](#), the website was the most important communications channel to the more than 2,100 nonprofits surveyed. Not utilizing it as a key channel in your storytelling strategy is a tremendous missed opportunity.

A close observation of how stories are presented on the 157 websites we assessed revealed several insights:

- Ease of access is important. Stories should be present on the homepage, with clear links to where you can find more. Only a third of the nonprofit websites assessed had stories on their homepages.
- Stories can (and should) be integrated into other pages on the website. Most common among the websites we assessed were placing stories on a separate page or tab (21%) and integrating them into program pages (15%).
- Presentation can make or break a story. Even the most compelling content will suffer if it’s hard to find, not an optimal size, or not alongside an easy way to take action.
- Web users today want to be able to engage with the content—but few websites give them the opportunity to do this. Only 20 percent of the websites we assessed had “share this” or equivalent functions built into their pages to allow people to share, comment or interact with the content, and only six websites allowed people to submit their own stories.
- Mobile stories are a must. As more and more users access websites on their mobile devices, having a mobile-optimized site—or at least a site in which stories still appear front and center when looking at it on a mobile device—is crucial.



What does a story-optimized homepage look like? We developed this mockup as an extreme example of all the ways in which stories can be incorporated into a homepage.

You'll notice:

- Large multimedia stories front and center
- A clearly labeled tab to direct users to more stories
- Stories that can be shared with the click of a button
- Clear calls-to-action alongside the stories
- A newsletter sign-up box that informs users they'll receive more stories by signing up (thus setting expectations around future content)

While a nonprofit homepage doesn't need to incorporate all of these elements, adding just a few of them will make your site more story friendly.

SUMMARY: KEY DISTRIBUTION STAGE QUESTIONS

- How can you ensure that the presentation enhances (or at least doesn't detract from) the story content?
- How can the story be shared across multiple channels, simultaneously or in sequence?
- How can you continue to share the story across weeks/months by tweaking/tailoring the message?
- Which platforms most naturally lend themselves to sharing this story? (Consider story length, absence/presence of compelling visuals, emotional content and strength of "hook")
- How can you engage your supporters around the "launch" of this story?



For more tips on optimizing your website, view our online [Tips for Creating a Story-Optimized Homepage worksheet](#).

Evaluation

The final step of the strategic story cycle ensures that you have actionable data with which you can begin the process over again with a new story or group of stories. However, it's also the most difficult step for most organizations.

Story measurement across most organizations right now is anecdotal—which can yield great results, but often isn't comprehensive and convincing enough to warrant increased investment.

“We do not track or measure systematically yet,” says Christine Lauterbach of Friendship Place. “But we do know that [stories] help. We have received checks that say, ‘this check is in honor of a specific person whose story we featured in a newsletter. We also do an electronic year-end appeal that features stories, and we know people are giving specifically because of those stories.’”

Kerrie Wilson of Cornerstones, Inc. echoes this. “Sometimes donors will say ‘we loved this month’s newsletter’ to the CEO, who passes along the information to the communications person who wrote the story,” she explains. “On occasion, a check will accompany a note saying ‘use this money to help these people’ about whom a specific story was written.”

But Wilson also highlights the increasing usefulness of social media statistics and other online analytics as a way of measuring story effectiveness. “Engagement has been made easier with social media and website tools because it allows for immediate feedback,” she says. “We measure this by studying the comments people make and their reactions to the different types of stories we produce on social.”

Organizations like DC Scores and Tahirih Justice Center also rely on Google Analytics and other social media metrics to track story performance. “We look at Google Analytics often to see what is driving people back to our website from social media, and what is leading people to certain pages on the website, such as volunteering and donating,” says Amy Nakamoto, former executive director of DC Scores. Using click-through rates, Tahirih Justice Center is able to measure that they get more hits on a client story than for other content, such as a gala update, says executive director Layli Miller-Muro.

MEASURING WHAT MATTERS

A simple framework for measuring the success of online content starts with having clear objectives for your story. Objectives can be categorized in three ways:

Awareness

“Increase pageviews on our “stories” page (or blog) by 25% between now and September 2014.”

Engagement

“Increase shares of stories posted on Facebook by 10% between now and September 2014.”

Behavior

“Increase newsletter sign-ups coming directly from stories by 10% between now and September 2014.”

Notice that each of these objectives is time bound and specifies a desired effect that can be counted or measured.

The next step is to translate these objectives into metrics that can be tracked.

AWARENESS	ENGAGEMENT	BEHAVIOR
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pageviews, unique pageviews • Open rates (email) • Referral sources (website) • Pages per session (website) • # of retweets • Facebook insights data on views/shares (reach) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shares on Facebook • Number of comments or @replies • Web traffic referrals • Time on website • Likes, retweets, pins • Content generated 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mailing list sign-ups (with referral source) • Pathways through website (Google Analytics) • Surveys • Conversions: create in Google Analytics to track “goals”

Finally, use free or low cost tools to gather the data and formulate insights.

PLATFORM	TOOL
WEBSITE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Google Analytics • A/B testing (optimize.ly)
BLOG	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Google Analytics • Bit.ly (when sharing on other platforms)
FACEBOOK	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facebook Insights • Bit.ly • Hootsuite/Tweetdeck
TWITTER	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hootsuite/Tweetdeck • Bit.ly, owl.ly, etc. • Klout, other influence metrics
YOUTUBE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • YouTube insights
E-NEWSLETTER	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Constant Contact, Mailchimp, etc. stats (open rates, click-throughs) • Campaign data from Google Analytics • A/B testing
GENERAL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Google alerts • Socialmention.com



For a real-time example of finding and interpreting story measurement data, view our [tutorial on Online Story Measurement](#).

Above all, knowing what you want to measure—and being able to translate that into objectives that you can collect data to support—will help avoid the trap of measuring the success of stories solely by how much money they bring in.

“In earlier years, there was a push to make everything be measured by what it generates in terms of donations,” says Roger Burks. “But the communications team was saying, ‘there has to be the element of building that relationship first—you don’t ask a person to marry you on the first date!’ So don’t make measurement only about the amount of money that comes in.”

And, make sure that part of your measurement strategy is sharing the story with its subject.

“Always remember that a person’s life is more important than the story you are trying to produce,” says Laura Pohl. “People sharing their story are gracious with their time and it’s usually fun learning about their lives—it always amazes me that people let me into their lives.”

SUMMARY: KEY EVALUATION STAGE QUESTIONS

- How can the call-to-action (decided in the Planning phase) best be measured?
- What are the appropriate benchmarks and key performance indicators for this objective?
- How can you close the loop with the story subject and ensure that s/he is happy with the portrayal and aware of the impact?
- How can you share the evaluation results with your organization to help build and grow the internal storytelling culture?



For a summary of each step of the strategic story cycle, visit our online [Strategic Story Cycle Checklist](#).

THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY:

Goodwill of Greater Washington's Online Travel Stipend Campaign

After attending the spring 2014 Stories Worth Telling training sessions hosted in conjunction with this research, Goodwill of Greater Washington reimaged the way they approached telling their story for a fundraising campaign. They planned, created and shared a compelling multimedia story that was unlike any other stories they had previously told, according to Shanna Gidwani and Nancy Lagomarcino, Goodwill's digital media manager and development coordinator, respectively.



Source: Goodwill of Greater Washington / YouTube

They generously shared their thoughts on how they approached each step of the strategic storytelling process, outcomes and lessons learned with us.

Planning

Goodwill's development and communications staff set specific goals for the story-driven campaign, which helped to clarify not only the type of story that needed to be told, but also how to measure whether or not it was effective.

The overall purpose of the campaign was to raise funds specifically for student travel stipends. According to Gidwani and Lagomarcino, high travel costs in the region pose a significant barrier to program completion for Goodwill's students. Providing \$10 daily stipends to students who meet attendance expectations can greatly increase program completion rates, giving more individuals the chance to take advantage of employment services and achieve self-sufficiency.

The timeline of the campaign was set for May 5-9, 2014, to coincide with Goodwill Industries International Week. The in-house storytelling team carefully chose its character, Aja, to tie in with the focus on travel, and opted to create a multimedia (photo + audio) story to evoke emotion and compel viewers to donate in specific amounts tied to tangible benefits (\$10 covers travel for a day; \$50 for a week; and \$200 for a month).

Production

The Goodwill team set out to recreate a typical day for Aja, highlighting the staggering seven and a half hours she spends commuting back and forth to their training site each and every day by metro and by bus.

“We wanted people to ask ‘why should I care about this,’” they explained. “The metro is so relatable—and then we reveal at the end that she does this every day, which is a bit of a surprising twist.”

Goodwill planned for the shoot ahead of time, creating a shot list with a mix of creative shots (like those of Aja standing still while people move around her in the metro station), and more authentic ones focused on her. They worked from this shot list on the day of, but also allowed for flexibility in capturing real-time moments as well. In addition to photos, staff members also recorded audio and video footage, some of which was used to transcribe quotes that accompanied the video sharing on social media.

“We ultimately decided against using a voiceover in the video itself,” they said. “It allowed us to truly show, rather than tell, the story.”

Distribution

The communications team took an integrated approach to sharing the weeklong campaign, starting on day one with an email appeal and sharing posts across Goodwill of Greater Washington’s social media channels. In addition to the two email appeals that went to the organization’s distribution list, they also utilized promoted posts on Facebook featuring the video and quotes throughout the week, and a variety of different Tweets sharing the video.

Often it can be a challenge for organizations to share the same content on social media each day, but Goodwill deftly addressed this issue by creating different quotes, questions and statistics to accompany the video each day. In addition, they posted progress updates that updated supporters on the current



totals—both in dollars, and in the total number of people who were provided travel stipends.

Perhaps most impressively, the organization followed up with engaging images on social media that thanked donors for their contributions and provided an update on the grand total for the campaign.

Evaluation

Success for the story campaign was measured in several ways—dollars raised being the primary metric, along with open rates and clickthroughs on the newsletters and social media engagement. While the campaign fell short of the initial fundraising goal set by the team, there were several interesting outcomes. Several of the largest financial gifts were given by lapsed donors, and were higher than previous giving amounts. Internally, feedback on the video was excellent, with many remarking that it was a bold departure from the style of previous stories.

“We heard that it made people cry,” said Gidwani. “Our workforce and human resources teams found it to be incredibly moving.”

While the new approach took more thought than previously developed stories, the team acknowledged that the process of developing it and the feedback they received could signal a storytelling culture shift in the organization.



STORIES WORTH TELLING

The Culture of Storytelling

A vibrant storytelling culture within a nonprofit can mean the difference between having one, somewhat stagnant story that represents the organization's impact and a living, breathing portfolio of different stories told from different perspectives.

It's the difference between having one person in the organization deemed the dedicated "storyteller" (whether that's the CEO, development director or head of communications), and everyone in the organization having compelling stories at their fingertips. And for many organizations, it's the difference between investing in telling the organization's story in a more compelling way—or not investing.

So what, exactly, do we mean by a storytelling "culture?" In looking at hundreds of nonprofit stories and interviewing the organizations with compelling evidence of having this elusive culture nailed down, we discovered that it can be broken down into two different components: a **mindset and appreciation** for stories, and **capacity**.

MINDSET & APPRECIATION

Regardless of whether the primary instigator of a nonprofit's budding storytelling culture comes from the bottom or the top, so to speak, experts agree that the mindset of thinking and communicating in terms of stories must permeate throughout the organization in order for it to be successful.

"If you are going to build a storytelling culture, you need to expose everyone to how it works," says Roger Burks. "You're essentially strengthening your organization's capacity by building more storytellers."

"Telling stories is our job. We jokingly say to each other, 'what is your story of the day?'"

- Layli Miller-Muro,
Executive Director,
Tahirih Justice Center

This means that not only does an appreciation for story have to be modeled at the very top of the organization—but that all staff must have an awareness of the story planning process, as well as a sense for how stories add value to their own work and the organization's work as a whole.

Maureen Dwyer, executive director at the Patricia M. Sitar Center for the Arts, describes how the organization encourages an appreciation for stories among its small staff. "We start every meeting by sharing new stories about the students in the center," she says. "The majority of these stories are written by various staff members with the grants manager taking the lead on organization and management. The stories are then included in a newsletter that is sent to parents and donors twice a year."

Sometimes, it takes an "aha!" moment to get everyone in the organization excited about the power of stories. Ron Geatz

EXPERT OPINIONS:

What is the best way to develop and sustain a storytelling culture within an organization?



ROGER BURKS,
ONLINE COMMUNICATIONS OFFICER, WORLD BANK

There has to be an instigator or group of champions that really believes in storytelling. While it doesn't necessarily have to start from the top, that is definitely helpful. You need a person who is the grain of sand that will irritate the oyster before forming the pearl. This grows through building consensus when you take it to the marketing department or the communications department and ask them about stories they could use. The first part is to build that core team before you take it up the chain to get organizational buy-in and then ideally, resources get allocated.



RON GEATZ,
THE NATURE CONSERVANCY:

We initially faced lots of resistance when pushing staff to tell personal stories about our work instead of using PowerPoint presentations. Staff thought it was too risky when trying to raise funds. But after witnessing enthusiastic support from hearing stories, they were quickly convinced. It was quite a turning point for the organization. Even with organizational support, it is a challenge to institutionalize storytelling. Nature Conservancy has to keep promoting it to staff; or it becomes tempting to fall back into PowerPoint presentations. If storytelling ability isn't demonstrated by people at the top, it doesn't matter how much the communications staff do. It won't really permeate the culture of the organization if not consistently reinforced.



LAURA POHL,
PHOTOGRAPHER & FILMMAKER:

When Bread for the World created the new position of Multimedia Manager a few years, there was still some skepticism about the value of visual storytelling. It took a successful film and significant positive public reaction to really convince the organization about the power of video storytelling.



JIM STIPE,
CATHOLIC RELIEF SERVICES:

Getting the fundraising department on board is key to gaining initial support, as they are the ones who mostly use the content created. Sometimes it's the field program officers who need the most convincing as it can take away lots of staff time usually spent on program activities. So it's really important to show them the connection of how the stories turn into dollars or tangible impact.

from The Nature Conservancy describes how an organization that is very fact and data-driven began to embrace the power of stories. “People in the audience were literally falling asleep,” he said of the first meeting of Country Directors he attended years ago. He immediately banned PowerPoint slides from the next meeting, imploring them to tell a single story instead. Geatz worked with each director to identify a personal story about their work, and to build their confidence in telling that personal story in front of a group of their peers. “Everyone was nervous and uncertain about it, right up until the last minute,” he said. But the results were transformational—a more engaged, connected audience and tons of internal excitement around the power of stories.

The evaluation phase of the strategic story cycle becomes critically important when thinking about reinforcing an organization-wide appreciation for stories. Nonprofits should look for opportunities to highlight the outcomes (whether anecdotal or quantitative) of shared stories and how they helped to

achieve measurable goals, even building this reporting into meetings in which stories are regularly shared.

CAPACITY

If having an organization-wide appreciation for stories translates to a *willingness* to invest in planning for and producing them, then the second dimension of a sustainable culture—capacity—translates into actually making that concrete investment. It’s having the systems, talent and resources in place. Since talent (whether internal or external) can have a tremendous effect on the systems and resources needed, organizations tend to think of maximizing their investment in that area first. Indeed, survey respondents highlighted staff resources as being the number one barrier to effectively telling their stories (31%), ahead of budget or other considerations.

So how can organizations maximize their investment in their storytellers? Many face the choice of whether to invest internally, externally, or both.



SURVEY SAYS:

How many staff members work on your organization's storytelling?

0 staff members – 0%

1 staff members – 19%

2 staff members – 19%

3 staff members – 30%

4 staff members – 10%

5 staff members – 3%

More than 5 – 19%

There are many different combinations of ways for nonprofits to allocate their storytelling investment. A few of the more common scenarios at smaller nonprofits include:

- An internal team of storytellers, each with skills (existing or developed) in photography, video, and overall storytelling basics (for example, some training in journalism or communications). Different skills and expertise can, at times, be staffed by interns or volunteers, though there's generally a full-time staff member coordinating the process to ensure sustainability and knowledge transfer.
- A single communications (or development) person, who is the storytelling focal point of the organization—coordinating with other internal staff to lead collection, training and planning for stories. Resources are invested in developing this individual's expertise.

- A communications team or individual who collaborates with external professionals and/or production companies.

Recognizing that it can quite often be cost prohibitive (and perhaps less sustainable) for organizations to consistently and exclusively hire outside professionals for their storytelling, many smaller organizations are focusing more on building internal capacity—whether training individuals, hiring staff with existing storytelling interests and skills, or spreading training opportunities across teams. (For a summary of the pros and cons of both, see the earlier section on Planning.)

A central challenge in building internal capacity is accurately assessing the effort and difficulty of storytelling, says Ron Geatz.

“Storytelling is a skill like other skills—it takes time to do effectively,” he says. “Can anyone be trained to be an effective program designer or grant writer in a workshop and a few weeks of practice? And is it an efficient use of resources to train staff in this skill when they already have other roles?”

Jim Stipe of Catholic Relief Services echoes this. “It feels like trying to teach people oil painting in three hours. You are not going to be a master at this stuff in three hours,” he cautions.



Learn how to “hire for story” — story-specific skills and experiences to look for in future hires — by viewing our online tool [The Ultimate Storyteller Job Description](#).

Despite this challenge, many organizations can and do successfully train internal staff to be their primary storytellers.

“When staff is hired, if they aren’t already storytellers, we make them,” says Jean-Michel Giraud, executive director of Friendship Place. “We conduct a training for our board to develop their own stories around ‘why they care,’ which must be personally relevant.”

Stipe recommends beginning the internal training process with people who have already demonstrated competency and passion for particular skills (like photography) and building from there.

It may be helpful for organizations considering training to think of storytelling skills as a continuum, with each particular skill set having an associated set of resources required to fully develop those skills—and implying that certain skills should be mastered before moving onto more resource-intensive ones.

For example, one would presumably need to have a keen understanding of the basics of storytelling (what makes a compelling story, how to build a narrative) and a well-developed eye for visuals before tackling more advanced skills like audio. Video requires synthesis of writing, visuals and audio, and thus is at the far end of the continuum.

Building Blocks



IN THEIR OWN WORDS:

How Nature Conservancy Learned An Important Lesson While Working With An External Storytelling Firm

Having the opportunity to work with an external team to produce your stories can bring broader perspective, according to Ron Geatz of the Nature Conservancy.

A few years ago, the organization hired an external firm to produce a series of video stories. While the move surprised its internal communications staff typically in charge of producing stories, The Nature Conservancy was looking for assistance in transitioning the way it talked about its work—away from strictly speaking in terms of biodiversity and nature, and more toward incorporating and featuring the voices of communities themselves.

“We had more diverse stories to tell,” Geatz said. “But we were stuck in the same ‘white-haired scientist talking about grasslands’ type of messaging.”

Nature Conservancy was hands-off, giving some guidance to the production crew to help define the story, but ultimately allowing them to go off and produce it creatively. The resulting video stories were very people-focused (answering the question of how conservation had made their lives better), which was shocking for internal audiences who weren’t used to seeing their work being talked about in those terms.

“It shook people up a lot, in both good and bad ways,” Geatz noted, but ultimately it helped turn the tide so that people saw their work as a benefit to people, not just to wildlife. “We learned from a marketing perspective and scientific perspectives that even when it’s about wildlife, if it’s a person telling it, it is more engaging.”

Geatz’s experiences at Nature Conservancy highlight one of the key benefits of working with external storytelling professionals: namely, that sometimes an outside perspective is necessary for understanding the best way to relate your organization’s stories to external audiences. “It’s too easy to stuck in your own little world, blinded by your expertise of an issue,” Geatz said. “You don’t realize that the perspective is limiting, and that other approaches may reach audiences more effectively.”



For guidance on successfully leveraging external talent to produce your stories, visit our online [Primer on Working with External Production Teams](#).

MESSAGING VS. STORYTELLING

Several years ago, The Nature Conservancy investigated how consistently its staff members were able to communicate the organization's key messages. They recorded various people responding to the prompt, "tell us what the Nature Conservancy does," and then played the tape back for senior managers.

"They were shocked," says Ron Geatz—because everyone was saying something different. "Previously, the organization was very easily defined. 'We buy land' was the catchphrase, but these days the organization does a lot of different things, so we have struggled with messaging as a result," he explains. Getting leadership to recognize the problem with messaging and respond by investing in refining that message was the first step.

Many organizations might stop here—investing in message training for staff to ensure consistency. But there's a difference between consistency of messaging and consistency of stories. Being able to tell a story requires a different skillset and different guidance.

Geatz describes what happened next. After executives led a message training session, staff were then asked to stand up and tell a story about it—and the resulting performances were less than stellar. The need for training on not just messaging, but on storytelling, was clear, he said. He was given the go-ahead and resources to conduct significant trainings across the organizations.

"This happened over the course of about one or two years," he said. "First, the recognition of needing to refine the messaging. Then, management seeing and liking the messaging but realizing people aren't able to translate messaging into compelling stories."

Perhaps the biggest misconception when approaching storytelling training for staff is that, like messaging, stories must be consistent. In fact, there are two dimensions to consistency: that of **content** (what's being said), and that of **process** (how you're arriving at what's being said). While messaging generally works best when both content and process are aligned throughout the organization, it's slightly different with storytelling.

As we've seen across the many stories analyzed in this research, authenticity and the storyteller's perspective are crucial—and these neither can nor should be consistent from one person to the next. A good storytelling training for staff, board or volunteers will emphasize consistency of process—of how stories are collected, created, shared and measured—while allowing for flexibility in story content, or how the story is being told by the individual.

Imagine a nonprofit board. Each individual likely has very different stories about how and why he or she has been impacted by the organization and decided to support it. Unlike a message training, in which everyone is equipped to recite the same elevator speech or mission statement, a story training will encourage them to find their own voice in sharing their stories—and will provide them with consistent tools (worksheets, for example) to help encourage the process.



How does your organization's storytelling culture stack up? Visit our online [Storytelling Culture Self-Assessment Tool](#) to determine your strengths and areas for improvement.

STORIES WORTH TELLING

The Future of Storytelling

 Our survey respondents were nearly unanimous in their agreement that the importance of storytelling will continue to increase in the coming few years. At the same time, the storytelling process for nonprofits will continue to get complicated as channels grow and change and audiences evolve.

The costs of producing high quality content will likely continue to drop—which is an opportunity for nonprofits but also a threat as more and more content floods the marketplace, raising the bar for quality and what’s required to stand out.

In our research, we’ve seen examples of organizations getting ahead of these changes by embracing some of the following future trends:

- **Designing stories for the experiential web**
Savvy storytellers are building their stories around what websites and online channels do differently than one-way media like television or radio: they give users an opportunity to interact. Whether it’s letting users manipulate data or giving them options for the order in which they consume content, stories will become increasingly personalized.
- **Crafting unique narratives**
The “hero’s journey” narrative will always have a place in nonprofit storytelling, but organizations are starting to think about other ways to tell their stories. [This video](#) by United Way of the National Capital Area is a terrific example of a newer type of narrative—envisioning the future.
- **Taking a bite out of stories**
Stories are getting smaller—think single Tweets, or eight-second videos. A defining characteristic of successful storytellers in the future will be the ability to pack a tremendous emotional punch into a very small package.
- **Positioning “audience heroes”**
Millennials are known for their slightly different views on giving, at least in comparison to previous generations. “Millennials want to be involved in the solution, not just hand over money,” says Ron Geatz. So stories will need to adapt to this changing notion of who the real “hero” is by focusing and involving the audience at the center of narratives.
- **Investing in Measurement**
Measurement of story success continues to be fertile ground for future study, as organizations invest in and adapt to new technology that makes it easier to link specific content to specific actions and funds raised.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS:

CRS on the Future of Storytelling

After several decades in the world of professional photography, Catholic Relief Services' Photo Editor Jim Stipe is struck by how much younger generations use photos of their daily lives. "Written language is going to continue to decrease," he says. "Long articles like an *Atlantic Monthly* piece are shifting down to Tweets. Everything is becoming smaller, down to one message."

The Catholic Relief Services team recently discussed an alternative video concept to reflect the decreased attention of audiences. Typically they would do one three-minute video covering what they do in emergencies including shelter, generating income and water. Instead they considered how it could be broken down into several 30-second videos focusing on only one issue—for example, one bite-sized shelter video and one bite-sized video on water. If someone wants to learn more there would be links that suggest 'watch this next video that tells a bit more' of the story.

Stipe watches the writers on his team cringe as they talk about the 'dumbing down' of content. Like photography, the whole communications industry is shifting, he says. "We can complain but we can't stand against the tide. You go in the direction it's going or retire or find a new occupation. The reality is a majority of communications is heading towards shorter, smaller, more focused, and more visual. We should be a part of it."

STORIES WORTH TELLING

Methodology

Stories Worth Telling is the result of more than a year of in-depth research, encompassing:

- A story audit of 157 organizations' online storytelling capabilities (assessing 355 total stories across websites and social media)
- A survey of grantees of the Meyer Foundation that included 81 respondents from across the Foundation's four program areas (Education, Healthy Communities, Economic Security, and Strong Nonprofit Sector).
- Hour-long interviews with high performing organizations from each program area. Organizations selected for interviews were rated a 4 out of 5 or higher in our audit. (For names and organizations, please see the Acknowledgements.)
- A landscape assessment of storytelling resources, publications and tools across industries and sectors.
- Interviews with thought leaders and national/internationally focused nonprofits with strong storytelling cultures and reputation. (For names and organizations, please see the Acknowledgments.)

STORIES WORTH TELLING

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