

The Power of Story: Bring Your Brand to Life

Use this template to engage supporters in exciting new ways.

By **Brandon C. Walsh**

As a nonprofit, your brand is a critical asset. Your brand helps nurture meaningful relationships, increase recognition, and encourage participation—all of which are critically important to growing and sustaining income.

On an emotional level, a strong brand gives people a reason to engage that's deeper and longer-lived than any specific offering. Thoughtfully crafted and creatively managed, your brand becomes a broader story, an *anthology* of stories, in fact, wherein your constituents are the protagonists and your brand the backdrop.

Tap into the Power of Storytelling

Storytelling has been with us since our earliest days. And while methods have changed over time, the power of a good story endures.

As a means of engendering common beliefs, exploring our fears, gathering context from history, celebrating prosperity, beauty, and love . . . storytelling just *works*. Stories move us, shape our beliefs, and carry our history forward — and most important, they're easy to share, and they stick.

As storytelling expert Stephen Denning¹ tells us:

Storytelling is natural and easy and entertaining and energizing. Stories help us to understand complexity. Stories can enhance or change perceptions. Stories are easy to remember . . . and engage our feelings. . . . Storytelling enables individuals to see themselves in a different light, and accordingly make decisions, and change their behavior in accordance with these new perceptions, insights, and identities.

This is why storytelling is so critical to brand building. After all, brand-focused communications should ultimately work to influence thinking and behavior — in your favor. With the ongoing proliferation of communications platforms and the increased interactivity of our world, the power of a good story is more relevant than ever.

“You have an untapped wealth of brand stories at your fingertips.”

Here are a few steps to kick-start a brand-focused storytelling program for your organization.

Step 1: Embrace a New Mindset and Define Your Storylines

For many nonprofits, a change in mindset is helpful to creating an effective brand-focused storytelling strategy. Put simply, view your brand as an independent media channel. Why? Independent media channels provide a distinct voice and view the world through a particular lens not shared by others. Independent media channels engender trust and loyalty, and give audiences reasons to connect above and beyond the particular programs they broadcast.

With this mental model, it becomes easier to decide what sort of stories to cultivate. Who are you? What do you stand for? What do you seek to advance? What role do your constituents play? Answering these basic questions can help define the resonant “storylines” you can credibly advance.

Effective storylines connect what you mean, stand for, and offer given what your constituents are looking for and value. That connection creates resonance which will, in turn, increase awareness, participation, and support.

Each storyline then serves as a header underneath which you can organize specific stories. You can use these storylines individually or in combination with each other, depending on the audience.

These storylines will help you find, develop, and organize real-life anecdotes that bring your brand to life — and make key messages human and relevant. For instance:

A symphony orchestra might organize stories around topics such as:

- advancing the art form
- preserving history
- fostering music appreciation in kids.

¹Stephen Denning, *The Springboard: How Storytelling Ignites Action in Knowledge-Era Organizations* (Boston: Butterworth-Heinemann), p. xv, as referenced by Roger Sametz, the founder of Sametz Blackstone Associates, in his “Storytelling through Design” article for the Design Management Institute.

A liberal arts college might cluster stories around:

- helping students become the best version of themselves
- a supportive and close-knit community
- transformative educational experiences.

A research institute might tell stories under the umbrellas of:

- translational science
- accelerating discoveries.

In the end, *your* storylines should inform how *you* communicate — whether in long form, photographs, in blog posts, or tweets — on behalf of your organization. Storylines are also useful as a structure against which to check blog posts, tweets, brochures, press releases, and so on. Examining your storylines will let you know whether you're truly telling your story through your efforts.

Once you define these big-picture storylines, it's time to identify specific stories that fit your framework.

Step 2: Mine Your Organization for Stories

Brand-building is the responsibility of your entire organization. The marketing group might set the strategy (in concert with overarching goals, of course), but branding is everyone's job — from volunteers and customer service reps all the way up to the board of directors. And it's within those two ends of the spectrum that the best stories are often found.

Engage your board members and volunteers by asking them to tell a story about your organization that exemplifies their reason for being involved (hint: it's not the paycheck!). Engage constituent-facing employees and ask them what they're hearing on the front lines. Chances are they hear things you don't!

Collect story ideas, gather the contact information of everyone involved, follow up, and fill in the details. The template below will help you craft specific stories.

Step 3: Make Your Stories Sing

To make a story “sticky,” you need a structure and a hook. To build your brand, you must clarify your organization's role in the constituent's journey. Here's a basic template we've used with a number of organizations to help develop a library of effective, brand-building stories.

Title: What would you name the story if you were making a movie of it? Pull the reader in. Think evocative and emotional as well as literal.

Subhead: What value did your organization add to this story? Convey progress. Speak to the interaction between your constituents and your organization.

Situation: In this story, who benefited from your organization's work? Choose one or two specific people

“What would you name the story if you were making a movie of it?”

to be the protagonists of the story. What brought them to your organization? What were they out to achieve? Did they engage with other organizations first? What are they passionate about? Contextualize within their broader lives and experiences.

Your organization's impact: How did your organization enter into these people's lives? What role did your organization play? Which products, programs, and services came into play? Who from your organization participated? What was innovative about your organization's role?

Progress and benefits: What value did your organization deliver? Describe your protagonists' progress. What breakthroughs did they experience as a result of their contact with your organization?

Results: How are these people different at the end of the story? Is the story ongoing? What benefits do you expect in the future?

For written stories, quote people's words wherever possible. Or adapt this outline into a script, and document your stories via short conversational videos. Do whatever works best, given your established communications strategy and your resources.

You have an untapped wealth of brand stories at your fingertips. A little planning, digging, follow-up, and editing can go a long way. 

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Telling Tales

For more on storytelling about your brand, see these articles at NonprofitWorld.org:

Why Invest in Brand? And Where Should You Begin? (Vol. 29, No. 3)

Telling the Story: Exploring Clients' Lives (Vol. 17, No. 1)

Simple Lessons to Preserve Your Brand (Vol. 31, No. 4)

The Nonprofit Branding Exercise (Vol. 26, No. 1)

How to Transform Your Brand (Vol. 28, No. 5)

Why Telling the Right Brand Story Matters So Much (Vol. 32, No. 3)