



Truth Is Better than Hype

Resist the urge to exaggerate, and your message will be stronger.

By Max T. Russell

When you've written as much as I have about ordinary people's lives and activities, you learn that everyone's story is compelling when told properly. Some people think they have to be celebrities to be interesting, even though ordinary individuals are often more interesting than celebrities.

A nonprofit's story may be rolled into the story of its founders. The best way to portray the nonprofit might be to accentuate information about the founders' journey, which will give a strong personal feel to the communications.

It's also where I see a lot of exaggeration. One newsletter said, "Mr. Sebastian is known around the world as a businessman who gets things done." But he isn't really. Some people in America know him and some in Ireland and Malaysia know him. That doesn't represent what we think of as "around the world."

I listened to the introduction of an incoming administrator whose list of exotic conquests and experiences made him look 10 times better on paper than he was in action. The lengthy list of superhuman feats and awards left me feeling as though I had lived life in vain.

The long resume was in fact useless. Within months, the hyped-up superhuman was replaced by a mere mortal. The board members vowed never to be hoodwinked again.

To achieve the appearance of celebrity status, many a marketing campaign will turn to hype and make unnecessary, grandiose statements about a product, service, or leader. This strategy is weak because it overlooks the value of facts. The best information you can get on anything is the truth about it. The more specific, factual details you can give, the more your words will ring true.

If Mr. Sebastian is known in three countries, tell about his work and reputation in those three, not "around the world." You don't need four to make a strong case. You should want people to see the truth when they inspect your claims. And

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you should communicate in such a way that people see good things the more closely they look.

Don't hide behind hype. State your good in the most honest terms you can. Stories and other information based in reality are enough when told with full clarity – when people see or hear the facts down deep. Hype is no match for truth. You can stand on truthfulness, whereas close inspection exposes what's lacking in hype.

Transparency and honesty scare many leaders, because they don't think the information they have is interesting enough by itself. Your organization has a history. You know its origins and accomplishments, the victories as well as the challenges. Turn those into a riveting, authentic story. When you tell the truth, you make it easier for people to get a handle on what you're really, truly doing. 



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Make Your Message Resonate

Use the keys in these articles (NonprofitWorld.org) to animate your communications:

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

How Jargon Undermines Communication (Vol. 27, No. 2)

What the Heck Are You Trying to Say? (Vol. 34, No. 2)

Boosting Visibility (Vol. 27, No. 2)

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

Cynicism Rx: Authentic Communication (Vol. 24, No. 6)