

# How Can You Create a Story to Help Raise Funds?

What are the keys to interviewing someone to capture their real-life story?



**Q** *Nonprofit World's* articles often mention the importance of telling a story rather than simply stating facts when you're raising funds and garnering support. I can see the value of using people's stories to engage an audience, thus increasing donations. The article "Revitalize Your Thank-You Letter with a Good Story" (Vol. 37, No. 2) was especially inspiring, and I've decided to collect some stories from our clients and volunteers to use on our organization's blog and to incorporate into letters to prospective donors. Can you give me some specifics about what questions to ask?

**A** Telling a great story starts with setting up a great interview. Time and again I've seen nonprofit professionals underestimate the importance of the interview. Here are a few tips:

**First, choose the right person** to interview. Ask staff, volunteer coordinators, board members, and other stakeholders to suggest people who are passionate about your organization and have had good experiences with it. Gather the names of a few people, and ask them if they'd be willing to sit for an hour with you, one-on-one, to answer a few questions.

**Never begin an interview** with, "So, tell me your story." It's the kiss-of-death question. It's broad. It's vague. It's overwhelming for the person you're interviewing.

Instead of asking just one general question to coax out the story, approach the interview like a conversation. Just as you would with a friend, ask questions, listen to what they say, and ask follow-up questions based on their responses.

That doesn't mean you can't prepare questions ahead of time. I would advise you to have five to seven questions written down. But be open to the possibility of asking new questions as they arise and following the conversation wherever it goes.

**Encourage interviewees to recount** their experiences rather than tell you how awesome your organization is. Compare "Sue Smith loves all the great services she receives at the library" with "Sue Smith learned to create a blog, inspired her children to become lifelong readers, and met her husband at the Book Club for Singles – all for free, and all at the library." Notice how much more compelling the second version is. Personal details are what make a good story.

**Provide context.** Before beginning the interview, let the interviewee know a bit about where the story will be used and who might read it. Tell interviewees they'll have final

approval of the story and that they're under no obligation to answer every question. Providing them with this information helps build rapport and trust.

**Focus on asking questions related to three things:** experience, emotion, and the future. These three categories will help you get to the best details of the story. "Experience" questions gather information about the interviewee. "Emotion" questions help you communicate how conflicts were resolved and how people felt. "Future" questions allow the story to end on an inspirational note. Here are some questions I asked a client who had graduated from an alcohol and drug recovery program:

**Experience:** What kind of an addiction were you struggling with? How did the addiction develop? At what point did you start to think about getting help with recovery? What was your experience like in the recovery program?

**Emotion:** What were you feeling when you came to the recovery center for the first time? How did you feel when you graduated from the program? What was it like to have your family there at the graduation ceremony?

**The Future:** Looking back on your experience in the recovery program, what's one piece of advice you'd want to give to someone who might be struggling with an addiction? What dreams and goals do you have for yourself? Do you want to give back to the recovery program by volunteering as a mentor?

I typically don't ask questions based on category. Instead, I ask questions in whatever sequence flows well. For instance, after asking, "At what point did you decide you needed help with recovery?" I followed up with, "What were you feeling when you called the recovery center to make an appointment?" First, I asked a fact-based question. The client's answer told me about his history and how his addiction came to a crux. By following up with a question that probed into his emotion, I was able to go a level deeper into the story, giving the audience a view inside his mind.

If you find yourself struggling to come up with questions, put yourself in your audience's shoes. What would they want to know? Sometimes this shift in perspective can help you find questions that will lead you to the most engaging story.

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