

STORYTELLING GUIDE FOR NEW NONPROFITS

STORYTELLING 101

Why do stories matter?

Storytelling is a powerful way to forge emotional connections with supporters. People tend to remember stories because they bring excitement and color to facts and ideas. Your rare disease story matters. Sharing it is a very persuasive way to engage your audience, invite them into your work and build a base for support.

A common thread in rare disease stories includes immeasurable obstacles and hardships like diagnostic delays, neurological and/or physical challenges of the individual diagnosed with the condition, a lack of researchers/interest in the disease state, or a lack of public awareness or empathy. When you share your story, you are likely speaking to experiences others have faced and are providing new hope through your nonprofit and its mission. This guide will review the basic elements of a story and characteristics of memorable stories, as well as address where you can tell your story and how to create a library of stories for future use. We also include the unique impact that rare disease stories make for nonprofit organizations in our space.

Elements of a story

Telling a story is a very effective way to communicate about your nonprofit because it invites your audience to emotionally connect to your work and mission. Your story can introduce the audience to an unmet need in the rare community and convince them that with their support the world can be a better place. Many people are unfamiliar with rare diseases and the specific way in which rare conditions deeply and profoundly impact an individual and their family's life. What is unique to rare disease storytelling is that it is often an education on the "rare experience," which is followed by a call to action or a plea for help.

Think about the people your organization serves and the work you do with them. How can the story elements below be applied to the work you're already doing?



ELEMENT	DEFINITION	"VOICES OF RARE CANCER: JAN'S STORY" EXAMPLE
Story Arc	The beginning, middle and end of your story comprises the arc. The beginning clarifies the character's goal, the middle introduces the conflict or challenge, and the end highlights how the character's situation has changed.	"My name is Jan and in January 2018 life changed for my husband and me as we knew it. I was on the operating room table to have gastric sleeve surgery... Shortly thereafter I heard those words: 'You have cholangiocarcinoma.' Wait – what?... I now spend my time raising awareness about this cancer."
Main Character	Your story needs someone that your audience can root for or care about. People connect to people. It's important for your story to focus on an individual person, as people have an easier time forming a personal and emotional connection with one person compared to a group of people. This is an opportunity to highlight the individuals impacted by your organization or passionate about your work.	Jan is the main character and shares her story about her diagnosis and treatment journey.
Setting	Set the stage for the story by using sensory language so your reader can imagine the situation. Your description can elicit specific sights, smells, sounds or tastes to help your reader better connect to the situation.	"I was on the operating room table to have gastric sleeve surgery. I had six months of intense and detailed medical tests prior to the surgery. Imagine my shock when I woke up from surgery..."
Challenge	The story peak is often centered around a challenge or difficulty your main character faces. Your main character's challenge may be very serious, but your tone and view on the issue should include a spark of hope so your reader feels empowered to help.	"Imagine my shock when I woke up from surgery...to be told: 'they couldn't do your surgery...they saw something on your liver so they aborted your planned surgery and did biopsies.' WHAT!??... Shortly thereafter I heard those words: 'You have cholangiocarcinoma.' Wait – what?...After a misstep in my care, which often happens with cholangiocarcinoma patients...I knew I was literally in a fight for my life."
Call to Action	The goal of your story is to rally support to your cause, so include a direct appeal to your audience to do something that will help your organization. A call to action gives your reader or listener an opportunity to become a participant in your story. The call to action does not need to be a donation request; it could be a reminder to follow your organization on social media or to sign-up for an upcoming event so the reader can stay engaged with your organization's work.	"Cholangiocarcinoma is often diagnosed at a later stage. It is difficult to treat with limited treatment options and has poor outcomes. We need to change this. I don't miss an opportunity to try to spread awareness about this rare and aggressive cancer. I truly believe that awareness = donations, donations = research, research = hope. And we all need hope!"

Think about what stories you can employ to help connect your audience to the mission of your organization and how you can tell them to be memorable. Stories that are memorable often include these elements:

- **Goal:** The story describes the main character's goal or desire, which gives the reader a chance to become invested in and care about the outcome of the situation. For many in the rare disease community, the goal is to foster patient connections, increase public awareness, shorten the time to get an accurate diagnosis, accelerate/fund research and find cures.
- **Quote:** The story includes a direct quote from the main character. This adds a layer of authenticity to the story as well as a sense of urgency for action since it's as if the reader is hearing from the individual directly.
- **Surprise:** A hook or a twist in the story will excite the reader. They will want to know what will happen next as the main character pursues the goal.
- **Accessible:** The language used to tell the story is accessible, easy to understand and sometimes colloquial to create common ground with the reader. Avoid using jargon when possible.
- **Show, Don't Tell:** The story shows the action instead of telling what happened. By showing, the story conveys the emotions you want readers to interpret and helps form that coveted emotional attachment to the character. For example, telling is "she was tired" while showing is "she yawned." Review your "tell" statements and think about how you can prove these statements (such as "she's tired"). How can you see or hear that someone is tired? Which actions demonstrate it?
- **Emotions:** The story engages your reader's emotions by making them feel something. This helps garner support for your organization.

Platforms and Approach

There are many platforms at your disposal to share your story. You can share written stories or video testimonials on your website, a dedicated blog, social media platform or in a newsletter. You will also likely have the opportunity to share a story out loud at fundraising events, on a webinar or a podcast. Try different approaches to sharing your stories and review your results, such as the click-through rates or the number of donations received (depending on what your call to action was), to better understand your community's preferences and where (and with what message) you're most successful.

Audio storytelling: NORD's podcast is one place to hear storytelling from the rare disease community in an audio format. You can listen here: rarediseases.org/nordpod.

Written storytelling: During Rare Disease Day, NORD collects many stories from the rare disease community and features them on our blog, rarediseases.org/tag/rare-disease-day.

The length of your story and the specific call to action can vary depending on the medium you select. Your website or blog may be best for longer and more detailed written stories. If you have a great picture or video associated with a story, consider using social media or a newsletter to feature the content. Evaluate what your audience connects to most easily and be open to trying a new medium.

Episodic Approach

You can maximize the effectiveness of a single story by using an episodic approach when sharing it. Serializing your story not only creates more digestible content for the reader but also creates anticipation for the next chapter in the story. Creating multiple touchpoints with one story can increase the likelihood that a reader will heed your call to action as they hear it repeated.

After the hook in the first segment of the story, you could ask a question such as requesting feedback so you can get to know your reader/listener better. Your call to action can change if needed. The second segment could end with providing next steps for your audience to engage with your organization, such as visiting your website. The end of the story could focus on your biggest ask, requesting a donation. Think about the ways you want to build your support base and incorporate those goals into your calls to action.

When selecting a story to craft into episodes, identify which story has had the greatest trial or triumph or the biggest change or result. With one story, you may be able to create three or more distinct opportunities to connect with your audience. Sharing the same story across multiple platforms, such as in a newsletter campaign and on social media, may seem like you are overdoing it, but readers respond positively to familiarity; it makes them feel like they know the community more intimately. Readers also like to know what to expect, so be consistent with your messaging and format when crafting each episode. This is just one example of many ways in which you can share your community's stories to build a stronger emotional connection with new supporters.

Creating a Story Bank

Your organization has access to many stories, such as those from your founder, a beneficiary, a donor, a volunteer or a staff member. Creating a story bank to capture and preserve these experiences ensures that you have content to promote throughout the year.

When building your story bank, be sure to not just focus on your own family or the founder's story. The community will appreciate learning about your specific struggle, but as the leader, you must be careful to balance the diverse experiences in your community. This ensures that the organization's content reflects the experiences of your larger patient population. Think of the individuals who have been the most positively impacted by your organization. Approach each person to ask if you can partner with them to share their story. Don't be shy about letting them know why they inspire you and what it would mean for the community to hear their particular story. The worst someone can say is no. For those who do agree, formally request their consent in writing to share their story. To promote transparency, good ethical practices and respect for the person, detail in your consent form how their story (and pictures) may be used now and in the future.

As you start gathering stories from your community, devise a system for categorizing them. Some category suggestions include: what subgroup in your community the story comes from, the length of the story, the format of the story (written, audio or video), or by theme. While it may take time and work to create a story bank, it is helpful to have access to a written copies or audio files of the stories so you can be confident you are being a good steward of your community's experiences and history.

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More Clicks and Gifts: The Award-Winning Virtual Fundraising Campaign Method You Haven't Heard of Yet (Bloomerang)

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13 "Show Don't Tell" Examples: How to Turn Bland Sentences into an Enthralling, Full-Color Story (Enchanting Marketing)

bit.ly/show-dont-tell-examples

BOOST FUNDRAISING EFFORTS WITH STORYTELLING

A Storytelling Board

Philanthropy is motivated by values, beliefs and world views. Since stories can show your organization's values in action, a story is an extremely powerful way to attract donors during fundraising campaigns. There are various types of stories with unique goals. Here are three story options that your board can use to support your organization's fundraising efforts.

Impact Story

When you think of nonprofit storytelling, the impact story may automatically come to mind. An impact story highlights the impact donors have on your community. Donors want to know the effect of their gift; this type of story meets that need. To create a succinct impact story, answer these three questions:

- What was the problem/issue?
- What was the solution to the problem/issue?
- What was the impact of the solution?

To support your board members with telling impact stories, consider implementing the following best practices:

- Provide your board members with high-level talking points to answer the three questions above.
- Educate your board on the story details and emphasize the key talking points.
- Share one story at a time so as not to overwhelm your board.

As discussed earlier, it can be helpful to start a story bank if you do not already have one since your board will need new stories to share throughout the year. Note that the length of the impact story may vary depending upon the context and channel (social media post vs. a thank you letter) that your board plans to use for sharing the story.

Personal Story

Each board member should have a personal story ready to share. This story will articulate why they decided to be on your organization's board, why your organization matters to them and how it reflects their values and beliefs.

Board members can develop their personal story by answering these questions:

- What was your challenge? For example, did you want to get involved with and give back to your community but didn't know how to get started?
- What were your choices and your decision-making process? What was the outcome of your choice? For example, did you think about volunteering your time or making donations to a few different nonprofits? Note the choice options and answer why you chose to commit to your organization (the reason does not need to be dramatic or extraordinary).
- How has your decision been meaningful? What have you learned from this organization? Select one compelling reason that you believe will help connect you with others in the community.

Who We Are Story

Funders need to connect with your organization to be inspired to give, and one way to do that is by describing who your organization is and what your organization supports or does. The "Who We Are" story should reflect how your organization presents itself on its "About Us" page, noting the problem you solve, the value of your organization and most importantly your vision for the future. This story provides an opportunity to inspire and engage people with your vision.

This type of story is especially powerful for board members to tell. They are the leaders of your organization and are instrumental in knowing your vision and making it a reality for your community. Help your board members be ambassadors for your organization by knowing how to describe and articulate your organization's vision for the future.

Creating a Culture of Storytelling on your Board

Here are three best practices to be a storyteller champion when it comes to your board.

Prioritize Your Asks

Review your fundraising strategy and determine which actions by your board members will help the plan succeed. Prioritize where you want to tell stories and what stories you want to tell. If you are planning donor meetings, board members should have stories ready. If you want board members to perform donor thank you calls, provide them a story to share.

Be Proactive and Build Confidence

Be crystal clear in detailing what role your board members can play in telling stories and engaging in fundraising. For example, to build your donor base, ask your board to share a specific impact story with five new connections. This does require more management on your part, but the clearer you can be with your instructions, the higher the likelihood that your board members will follow through.

Provide your board with small tasks to create momentum and build confidence. For example, if you want to encourage your board members to make asks at donor meetings, start with a smaller step of getting board members on the phone with donors to thank them.

Start with a Story

Create a culture of storytelling by sharing stories at your board meetings. By doing so, you are engaging your board and leading by example. You can add variety to your meetings by inviting a volunteer to share their story or by asking a board member to practice sharing a story of their own that highlights the power of your organization. Another benefit to this practice is that storytelling will help your board members internalize the mission and vision of your organization before moving on to the rest of the meeting agenda.

Writing Successful Stories for Newsletter Articles or Appeal Letters

Stories are the perfect vehicle to get people to care about what you do. All the work you do impacts real people, so bringing those stories to life has the power to engage your audience and boost your fundraising efforts. Improve your donor communications in your appeal letters and newsletters with these following tips.

Best Practices for Story Writers:

- **Know why you're writing and say so.** It's important for the reader to know the reason you're contacting them, so practice specifying "this is why I'm writing to you" when you first start writing a story. It will put you in the correct mindset as you draft your story.
- **Be smart about the pronouns you use.** Say "you" a lot in your story, meaning you, the reader. Use pronouns such as "I," "we" or "us" as little as possible. If you do use "we," it should not refer to we, the organization, but rather you, the reader, and me, the person from the organization writing to you. If that meaning is not clear, find a way to make it so.
- **Emotionally involve your audience.** Do not write like a novelist or technical writer. Novelists write dramatically, which is not how people talk. Dramatic writing can signal to a reader that the story is fiction, and that is not appropriate when fundraising. Read your story out loud to confirm the language sounds conversational. Technical writers stick to the facts and do not include emotion. Emotion is necessary to spur people into action.
- **Repetition, repetition and repetition.** You need to repeat yourself. Readers do not read your story from start to finish but will skip around. As the writer, you might become bored since you're reading a similar message repeatedly, but know that your donor is not reading thoroughly. It will take several times for them to really understand your message. That said don't repeat just to repeat. More copy doesn't mean more views or engagement. Be respectful of people's time and attention.

Storytelling Strategies:

- In a newsletter story, you have only two protagonists—the beneficiary and the donor. The donor needs to be specifically addressed in the story, so they know they're involved. Even a phrase as simple as, "this is possible because of you" will invite your donor into the story. Since this type of writing is not journalism, your organization should not be a protagonist.
- In appeal letter stories, leave the story unfinished and unsolved so the donor can solve it. Give your donor the role of completing the story. It emphasizes that your organization needs the donor's help; they can give the story a happy ending with their gift. The donor should have only two choices upon reading the story: either make a difference or do nothing.
- The story you tell is the donor's story, not the one of your organization. Do not ask your donors to join the organization's story. That strategy is not as powerful as asking them to do what they're already interested in doing. You are not recruiting the donor into your cause; flip that narrative for smarter fundraising. As a result, your organization will not be mentioned often in the fundraising letter.

REFERENCES:

Network for Good – Use Storytelling to Turn Board Members into Fundraisers

bit.ly/network-for-good-fundraising

7 Crucial Storytelling Tips to Improve Your Fundraising (Nonprofit Storytelling Conference)

bit.ly/crucial-storytelling-tips