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Nonprofit Storytelling: Framing the Message for Compelling Communication

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LITERATURE REVIEW

Communication in both the for-profit and nonprofit sectors exists to facilitate exchanges with constituencies (Gainer, 2010, p. 325). In the nonprofit sector, communication pertains to an array of audiences, including clients, donors, funders, partners and volunteers (Gainer, 2010, p. 301). As communication should be framed to meet the needs of the audience, it becomes difficult to create messages that are effective for all constituents and stakeholders. Additionally, nonprofit organizations use communication for a variety of purposes within the organization, making it difficult to find one technique that is both effective and compelling to fulfill these roles. Storytelling has become a popular technique within nonprofit communication. It has been praised as “the key to relevant fundraising” (Barden, 2015), and when done well can be more powerful than statistics, demonstrating that “one is more than many” (Chung, 2014). Despite this, Kanani (2014), for example, emphasizes that storytelling cannot stand-alone as a measure of success. Rather, it should be coupled with relevant data measurements of organizational impact. In this literature review, I examine the role of nonprofit communication followed by an analysis of the roles storytelling can have within the organization. The chapter concludes with best practices for the use of storytelling in the nonprofit sector.

Communicating the Message

At the center of nonprofit communication are fundraising, branding and raising awareness. According to David Williamson (2009), professor at Georgetown University’s Center for Public and Nonprofit Leadership, communication is the means of survival for nonprofit organizations (p. 2). Competition for philanthropic resources and public attention is fierce as organizations are

competing for assets from the same pool of potential volunteers and donors. Communication is about more than brochures and the content on a website. It includes all interactions between the nonprofit organization and its constituents; even when an organization is not producing blog posts or sending e-blasts, it is still communicating a message to constituents as the organization's voice is lost while another emerges. An important component of effective marketing is utilizing "pull" communication, that is, the messaging provides opportunity for action through different channels such as commenting on a post or using the "donate now" button.

Communication serves many purposes within the nonprofit organization. It supports fundraising efforts, highlights mission impact, demonstrates transparency and builds the brand (Williamson, 2009). Communication can advance the mission of an organization. For example, social marketing, defined as using marketing techniques to change behaviors for the greater social good, is a strategy that lives out the mission of the organization while communicating it to constituents in a way that is memorable and effective. Additionally, people are becoming more intentional about what organization they give their time and money to. When an organization demonstrates its ability to accomplish the mission, individuals become more likely to donate. This is particularly important for a new generation of donors, as millennials (people born between 1981 and 2000) are more likely to donate to organizations that they can experience the work of without being onsite (Pyser, 2014). The way to do this: descriptive, compelling communication.

The duties of an organization's communication are not limited to one area; rather, from programs to development, all areas of an organization have to use communication to thrive. All messages the organization sends must seamlessly fit together, creating one unified message that is written from the same identifiable voice of the organization. An effective

message is framed for a specific targeted audience. This practice is a craft that occurs with the intentional focus of creating a compelling message with attention to the details that create the organization and language that describes it. A crucial task for nonprofit organizations is to communicate their ability to make a difference, in other words, their social impact. This has become a particularly important issue in recent years because of the increasing attention to accountability and performance measurement.

Measuring Impact

Strategies of measuring social impact are key components of the new centrality of performance management within the nonprofit sector. Measuring impact within the sector is necessary for evaluating the effectiveness of organizational performance. Quality measures can increase the effectiveness of services by allowing organizations to learn from past failures and successes and make adjustments; develop accountability among funders; and learn from success to advance the sector (*Connecting Program Outcomes*, 2005, p. 5). Although extremely important, measuring impact is complex and easily overlooked or neglected within an organization because of the subjective nature of program success and the lack of resources (Thomas, 2010, p. 401).

As a measure of impact, nonprofit organizations often measure outputs rather than social impact. For example, in the case of a child sponsorship program, a true measure of impact is not solely the number of children being sponsored – an output – but rather the influence on the lives of the children that develops from acting on the services of the sponsorship, such as graduating high school or getting a job. Often, data relevant to a project's objectives do not receive the analysis necessary to actually evaluate impact (Kanani, 2014). Measuring impact

is only effective if the most relevant data is measured.

To address this issue, different tools have been created to measure impact. One of the most commonly used is the logic model, which was developed by United Way in the early 2000s to ensure best practices and accountability of its member agencies. The logic model allows organizations to analyze the relationship between resources, activity and outcomes through a systematic visual representation (KF, p. 2). The model describes the intended results that will occur from mobilizing resources and developing activities. The logic model approach creates shared understanding and emphasizes goals that influence methodology to produce quality outcomes (KF, p. 5).

In line with this focus on outcomes and social impact, the Urban Institute and the Center for What Works developed the Outcome Indicators Project in 2006. The research provides a framework for tracking nonprofit performance. The project identifies a standard approach for nonprofit organizations to collect and analyze data from their work to inform practice. The study examined fourteen program areas and developed tools to help measure and understand program outcomes and outcome indicators. These program areas cover a diverse array of social goals, ranging from adult education and family literacy to assisted living and performing arts. Nonprofit organizations can utilize this tool to improve how it measures impact, therefore improving overall communication with constituents about mission impact.

The focus on performance management, however, creates new challenges for the communication and marketing side of the nonprofit sector. A key question becomes how to engage various stakeholders in the organization's work, while at the same time, demonstrating impact. A national survey of nonprofits found that organizations communicate data to acquire new donors, engage their community and promote their brand (Baum, 2015). Organizations have shifted from relying

heavily on numerical data to a focus on anecdotal evidence. Concerns arise with both numerical and anecdotal evidence in the nonprofit sector – neither incorporates *both* human value and statistical analysis. While the use of anecdotal evidence is meant to measure a “changed life,” the parameters around this are difficult to identify. Furthermore, one success story of a “changed life” described through anecdotal evidence does not translate into long-term success, neither for the individual nor the organization. One constituent’s success story does not translate into a successful organization. Michael Smith, director of the United States government's Social Innovation Fund, argues in his TEDxMidAtlantic talk that it is necessary to see if the results found in one success story are consistent for the organization and is not its only success story of “a gangbanger turned MIT nuclear physicist.”

According to Andy Goodman (2015), a public interest communications consultant, a combination of data and storytelling should be used to measure and share organizational success. Neither can stand-alone as an effective measure of impact. The data need to support the story, and by reinforcing each other they have the ability to impact different audiences with a greater punch, as people react differently to different types of data. The story provides the connection; the data backs up the connection and provides depth to the story. Anecdotes humanize a complex societal problem, and the data proves that you have more than one story to tell about the work of the organization.

Framing the Message

As an organization must communicate its mission and impact, the framing of the message shapes the potential effectiveness of the content. As described by framing theory, one issue or topic can be viewed from a variety of perspectives, and the perspective the issue is told from shapes the meaning of the message.

According to Dennis Chong and James Druckman (2007), professors at Northwestern University, framing refers to the process people use to conceptualize an issue and orient their thinking about a topic (p.104). A frame organizes reality, showcases societal trends and provides interpretations for the consumer. Framing begins at topic selection, as choosing to discuss one topic and not another assigns value to each topic (Chong & Druckman, 2007, p.106).

Framing a message with the right frame produces effective communication. It is not enough to simply communicate; rather organizational messaging must be communicated well to be compelling. Digital marketing experts estimate that most Americans are exposed to around 4,000 to 10,000 advertisements daily, not including all other messages an individual receives through daily interactions with people (Marshall, 2015). Because of the overwhelming amount of messaging current and prospective constituents are exposed to, messaging must be thoughtfully framed to attract attention in a sea of advertisements and appeals.

Within the nonprofit sector, storytelling is a narrative communication technique to frame a message that is able to fulfill the needs of the organization and communicate with multiple audiences by showcasing a constituent's experiences. It has a wide variety of application, but at the most basic level, stories are used to share the impact of the organization's work and evoke emotion that will cause the reader to take action. Storytelling has the ability to be a fundraising tool, develop a brand and raise awareness through a single story. It can be used across different communication channels from social media platforms to mailers and word of mouth. Storytelling is not restricted by budget, but is available for all organizations to utilize. The following subsections describe roles of storytelling within the nonprofit sector.

Storytelling as a Communication Technique

Although the communication technique of storytelling has been common practice for decades, storytelling has become the buzzword within the nonprofit sector within the last five years. According to collaborative research by Georgetown University Center for Social Impact Communication and the Meyer Foundation (2014), storytelling is one of the most talked about, yet least understood topics in nonprofit communications and fundraising today. Eighty-one nonprofits serving the greater Washington, D.C. area were surveyed for the study. The results showed that 59 percent of participants used storytelling with the main goal of increasing fundraising dollars, 25 percent of participants used storytelling as an awareness tool and 9 percent used it as an advocacy tool. The top three channels for sharing the stories were on the organizations' website, in an e-newsletter and on Facebook. An additional component of the research included completing an online story audit of 157 nonprofit organizations serving the greater Washington, D.C. area. These results showed that 68 percent of the stories had a clear call to action to either donate (77 percent) or volunteer (50 percent). All of the stories told focused on the mission in action, telling why services are needed, how the mission is delivered or the founding history of the organization.

Not all stories must be told the same way and different approaches can be taken that best fit the content of the story with the delivery method. Five types of stories include: founding, focus, impact, strength and future (Schwartz, 2014).

- *Founding* stories tell the story of the organization's creation. This type of story tells why the organization was created, and the main character(s) will be the founding member(s) of the organization.
- *Focus* stories tell why the organization continues to exist. These stories connect the dots between mission and constituents.
- *Impact* stories are the testimonial stories that reveal the influence

an organization has had on an individual's life.

- *Strength* stories highlight the work that the organization does well and the particular programs that advance the organization's mission.
- *Future* stories emphasize the call to action and describe the vision of the organization. Although these are different types of stories, often they can be combined into one story to highlight different components of the organization.

Julie Dixon (2014), research director of National Journal's Communication Council, advises nonprofit organizations to create a culture of storytelling within the organization by establishing a "story bank" with a consistent supply of stories that describe the organization's work. In doing so, she suggests the organization's work can be shared not only on paper or a computer screen but also by word of mouth, shared during a donor call or at a volunteer appreciation event. These banks become a living portfolio of the organization's work that are continually updated and in sync with how the organization is actually performing. Organizations of any size can utilize storytelling, as there is no financial tie to the practice. Organizations must commit to intentionally seeking out and sharing stories internally in order to create this type of culture. One suggested practice is having each director verbally share the stories that developed within their area during staff meetings. Devoting time to this when all employees are together benefits the staff as they hear the influence of their work, and the stories of the organization naturally come together to "fill the bank." This requires buy-in and appreciation by all staff members to be effective, and the purpose behind the effort should be shared among the staff before practice.

Storytelling to Develop Empathy

A benefit of storytelling is the ability for the reader to connect with one individual and develop empathy. Maya Angelou's quote, "*I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel,*" stands true with storytelling, highlighting the high value placed on emotion (Gallo, 2014). It is easier for donors to believe they can make a difference when they are connecting with an individual, rather than a statistic that may lead the prospective donor to wonder whether "my donation even make a difference." The readers of the story have the ability to see themselves within the story while placing themselves in the shoes of the main character, thus developing empathy. Empathy allows the reader to see the world from another point of view by developing a shared perspective that results in shared emotion. In contrast, sympathy develops the emotions of sorrow and pity for another person's conditions, but neglects the shared component of walking in another person's shoes. Thus, empathy is the emotional response that will lead to action.

In a study by Saerom Lee, Karen Page Winterich and William Ross Jr. (2014), the influence of justice and empathy in giving patterns was examined. According to the study, "it's not only the characteristics of the giver that determine their likelihood of donating, but characteristics they perceive in the recipient" (p. 4). For causes that do not naturally develop empathy, utilizing storytelling is a technique to draw potential donors close to a cause by developing a connection between reader and character. Neurologically, storytelling has the unique ability to evoke emotion, develop empathy and inspire action through the response that occurs in the brain when engaging with a compelling story (Zak, 2014). According to this research, the stress hormone cortisol is produced during tense moments of a story, increasing focus, while oxytocin, a feel-good chemical, is produced when a connection is made with the story, developing a sense of

empathy. The “happily ever after” of a story stimulates the limbic system and releases dopamine, creating a hopeful and optimistic feeling. The greater the release of these chemicals, the more likely an individual is to respond to a call of action. As social creatures, we desire to relate to others, increasing our likelihood to choose to engage in a story over other communication techniques.

Storytelling as a Component of Branding

The cornerstone of marketing is branding. According to Peter Frumkin (2015), director of the Master’s in Nonprofit Leadership program at the University of Pennsylvania, a brand is the “sum total of perceptions about what a nonprofit stands for, what it does and how much social impact it is thought to achieve.” It is the identity a constituent or stakeholder associates with an organization, and essentially relates to its reputation. The identity a stakeholder associates with an organization can be positive or negative, just as a reputation can be. Frumkin argues that an organization’s brand is its most valuable asset, making it the “gateway to all other assets, both human and financial,” because of the reputation factor.

Emphasis on branding in the nonprofit sector has continued to develop since its emergence in the 1970s. Nonprofit organizations focus on branding for reasons including communicating organizational values; developing trust among constituents through consistency of messaging; ability to attract potential donors and volunteers through appealing marketing materials; and creating a unique image for the nonprofit organization that allows it to stand out among other organizations with a similar mission. Conversely, nonprofit organizations may hesitate to fully embrace storytelling because they fear of being perceived as too commercialized and because of the difficulty of justifying diverting resources from services (Ritchie, Swami & Weinberg, 1998). Although branding is

important, organizations must provide services that reinforce the perceived brand of the organization to be effective.

Frumkin states that one of the building blocks to a successful brand is communication. For a constituent to develop an identity with an organization, they must know something about the organization, which is discovered through interaction with the website and collateral material, participating through volunteering, donating or attending a program as well as interactions with other constituents of the organization. Word of mouth spreads information between people, and stories are often the form of communication people use to share an experience. These stories develop the identity of a nonprofit organization in the eyes of constituents, therefore shaping the brand of the organization. When nonprofit organizations use stories to describe their work, the organization is choosing the stories that will be shared with constituents. Organizations handpick the stories, thus shaping their identity and the public perception of their work. These stories should showcase the organization's mission and values in ways that readers can align with their own beliefs to develop a relationship between constituent and organization.

Storytelling as a Fundraising Tool

As storytelling builds brand identity and shares organizational impact, it is natural for storytelling to be of benefit for grant seekers. The story serves many purposes for the nonprofit organization, and allows grant makers to develop a connection with the organization. Storytelling provides a creative approach that allows the organization to stand out among other grant seekers that serve the same target population. Storytelling develops a descriptive outlet for sharing unique programs or models in a way that humanizes the approach.

Storytelling may also recruit new donors. Not only can stories be shared

on the organization's communication channels such as social media platforms, e-blasts and newsletters, but these stories may also be shared with potential donors in face-to-face meetings. Fundraising is rooted in relationships that are built on trust that can be shared through stories as they illustrate the past use of funds and how they were used with accountability. Furthermore, sharing stories allows donors to feel a connection with the organization. As the emotional connection develops, the potential donor is inspired and responds to the call to action.

As relationships are cultivated with donors, the organization's representatives learn to know the donors and thus are able to share the stories that match donors' specific interest in relation to a particular program of the organization. First, allow the donor to tell their own story and listen intently to find connections between the donor's experiences and passions that align with the organization. After meeting with a donor, record important information about their life and interests to follow up on, and come prepared to the next donor meeting with a story tailored to their interest. It is important that the organization has multiple stories prepared that describe different aspects of the organization's work and align with the persona of a variety of donors.

Using the storytelling technique provides a unique approach to the typical campaigns and fundraising approaches. A series of stories can be used as a fundraising campaign to share memorable impact. For example, storytelling could be used as an end of the year campaign to highlight the organization's stories that developed throughout the year. These stories could be shared using a multi-channel approach, sharing stories via email, direct mail, website and social media platforms. Stories could be highlighted during online giving events such as #GivingTuesday to make the organization stand out among the hundreds of organizations participating in the same event. Additionally, a special event can be focused on the life of an individual impacted by the organization. The event may be in honor of an individual who has passed away,

and the story of their impact and affiliation with the organization can be highlighted as the angle for the story (Chase, 2016).

Storytelling to Raise Awareness

Storytelling is also used to shine a light on issues that may be overlooked within society. Sharing a personal experience relating to a controversial topic or rare occurrence humanizes the experience and forces readers to think about an issue they may have otherwise not considered. For example, Global Genes, one of the leading rare disease patient advocacy organizations in the world, inspires those with a rare disease to share their story as an awareness tool. The organization has created a toolkit that guides those with a rare disease or a loved one with a rare disease on crafting their story. The toolkit includes information on how to write their personal story, where to share it and how to use research as supplementary information. These stories are used to provide support to those with the disease by creating a community of people with a similar experience as well as provide anecdotes to researchers, doctors and donors to assist in their understanding of the human impact of the disease.

Additionally, while acting as a tool of advocacy, storytelling can act as an educational tool. Stories share wisdom and showcase culture based on an individual's experience. A reader has the ability to peek into the world of the storyteller and gain insight from their perspective that may be different than their own based on the differences in storyteller and audience demographics. As storytelling is a universal experience, it mends a divide between cultures (McCullum, Maldonado & Baltes, 2014, p. 2).

Best Practices for Nonprofit Storytelling

Storytelling is a powerful communication technique that can be used to enhance and showcase organizational success. The following practices shape a compelling story from capture to craft.

1. Tell the story ethically.

When individuals trust an organization and allow their stories to be shared, it is important to tell them ethically and respectfully. The storyteller must consider the impact the story will have on the character's life once the story is published. This should be considered in all components, including verbal and visual.

This ethical concern has been relevant for decades. The term "poverty porn" was coined in the 1980s to describe images of starving African children in nongovernmental organization's collateral material to bring in donor dollars. These images strip the children of their dignity and exploit their circumstances for financial gain. When sharing an organization's story, it is necessary to share the individual's experiences without bringing shame to the individual. Rather, the story should be used as a tool of empowerment (Gharib, 2015).

2. Do not showcase the organization as the savior.

It is easy to make the organization appear to be the savior of the individual, depicting the situation as if their program or service was the only way these individuals were able to overcome the challenges they faced. Rather, the organization should be characterized as a partner in the individual's success. This will deviate from "case example syndrome" that creates a generic story of the work of the organization and will instead showcase the journey of the character within the story (Marple, 2014).

3. Create an emotional appeal.

Compelling stories create an emotional response by allowing the reader to empathize with the characters in the story. When choosing the stories to tell, focus on those that naturally draw out emotion. People remember what they feel and are

moved by their emotions, making the emotional appeal a crucial component of a compelling story (Wu, 2011).

4. Showcase an interesting protagonist and let their voice be heard.

The story will be centered on the character's experience making it important to have a character that is willing to share their story vulnerably. Stories will personalize the issue the organization is bringing awareness to, so they must be stories worth sharing (Wu, 2011). When writing the story, the storyteller should include direct quotes of the main character to ensure their voice is clear and is the foundation of the story. When the character reads their story after it is written, he or she should be able to identify their personality and experiences within the story (Marple, 2014).

5. Interview like a journalist.

The interview is where the story will be captured so it is necessary to come prepared with a framework of questions, background information and audio recording devices. Frame the interview as a conversation so the individual feels comfortable sharing the details of their story, especially as many nonprofits have a mission focused on a sensitive issue. Consider the location of the interview, as some interviewees will prefer to be in a private area. When interviewing, ask follow up questions, seek clarification and ask about more than just what happened. Ask specific questions regarding emotion, experience and future goals (Tomassini, 2015).

6. Humanize the story through the details.

Details make the story intriguing and relatable. Details create the specific connections between the story's character and its audience. Compelling stories are built on details, and asking specific questions during the interview will reveal this necessary information.

7. Consider the organization of the story.

Depending on the character's experience, the story may or may not follow the traditional narrative arc that has a clear rising action, climax and falling action. Consider featuring the protagonist to showcase their personality when the narrative arc is not appropriate. This method highlights the protagonist's character in addition to their overall personal impact and experiences associated with the organization. This provides another approach to connection between reader and protagonist.

For stories that do follow the narrative arc, the story should have a clear beginning, middle and end. A simple way to format the story is to highlight a problem and build up to the process of overcoming it, creating suspense as the story builds. The story should develop anticipation as the rising action occurs. Following the narrative arc will ensure all components of the story are told while including the "who, what, when, where and how" of the story (Girardin, 2015).

8. Create a call to action.

The conclusion of the story should prompt the reader to take action. This can be as simple as saying where to find more information. The story should show the difference a donation of time or money can make, and it should provide the opportunity to take part and sign up to volunteer, join a mailing list or donate (Lee, 2016).

9. Consider the structure of your story.

The outlet where the story will be published will determine how long the story is and what format is used. The purpose and platform of the story should be decided before conducting the interview. The story must fit the platform of publication, as a Facebook post differs from a printed newsletter in regards to length and ability to incorporate links and other interactive components. For video, one to two minute clips are ideal. No matter the format, the story should have a logical flow and should make it easy for the reader to follow along. (Wu, 2011).

10. Include a visual.

If content is associated with a visual it is more likely to be engaged with as humans are visual first, verbal second. Visuals are an effective way to elevate the story and make a connection with the reader as seeing the face of the character creates a sense of commonality despite differences (Girardin, 2015).

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