



Let It Grow, Let It Grow, Let It Grow

Gaining Members Through Telling Stories

Stories are the most effective and powerful form of narrative structure (other “forms” include examples, anecdotes, case studies, and the like). Why? Our brains are hard-wired to collect, store and recall situations in story form.

Imagine you are part of one of four field experiments*. The experiments are not important. What matters is the envelope you are given afterward. In each envelope are five, \$1 bills and a letter from a charity requesting an anonymous donation. The first letter highlights the organization and data surrounding its relief programs. The second letter is only a story about the plight of a young girl and the difference the organization’s services made in her

life. The third letter combines the story with the data.

Which letter triggered the most monies? If you answered the second, you are correct. People gave more than twice as much as the other experiment participants. This study reinforced what Kendall Haven demonstrates though 350 research studies in his book, *Story Proof* (2007, Libraries Unlimited): Stories are the most effective and powerful form of narrative structure (other “forms” include examples,

anecdotes, case studies, and the like). Why? Our brains are hard-wired to collect, store and recall situations in story form.

Now, which letter garnered the most monies after this? The answer: Neither. Statistically the first and third letters sparked the same small amount. How did this happen? The researchers concluded that data diminishes the emotional impact of a story. Why? While in thinking/analytic mode, people could not emotionally connect or sympathize with the child's plight. Additionally, people connect best with an "identifiable" person, not a group.

What Does This Mean To You?

Every association seeks the secret sauce — how to create the right conditions so current and prospective members open their wallets and hand over monies for membership dues. Sending e-mails touting the association's benefits and services is not going to do it. Neither are traditional member endorsements. Telling prospects they are going to miss a future opportunity will not either. Forget data and facts; even in the shortest of short-term memory, they are not remembered.

To get people to take action, you need to engage them beyond their intellect. You need to pull at their hearts and spirits to get them to want what you offer. The only way to do this is through story. Especially in today's world when keeping members is more critical than ever.

Types of Stories

Associations are best served by harnessing two categories of stories: individual stories from their members and stories that highlight various aspects of

the association. Imagine having an easily searchable database of these stories at your disposal to use in a variety of membership media (print, web, social media, presentations, etc.).

Individual	Association
Where I Came From Stories: Specific stories about milestone events in your life that made a difference in who you are today.	Founding Story: The story about that moment when the founder(s) knew unequivocally that the association needed to be started.
What I Value and Prize Stories: Experiences depicting specific core values and guiding principles that define what is important to you.	What We Stand for Stories: Experiences depicting specific core values, guiding principles and brand themes that define the overall association.
What I Do Stories: Memorable moments in your work life that define how you spend your time.	What We Do Stories: Memorable moments that highlight facets of your association's products and services.
Future Story: What you believe the future holds for you based on your own personal vision. It is the future you are creating for yourself.	Future Story: A future state of being, told as though fully realized. It could be the association's vision, a breakthrough strategy, or a project vision. It is the future you and your members are co-creating.
My Personal Success Stories: Your experiences over the years that have resulted in favorable outcomes.	Our Internal Success Stories: Group and individual experiences resulting in favorable association outcomes (not all may be sharable externally).
Overcoming Barriers Stories: Experiences throughout life where you have successfully surmounted fears or obstacles.	Overcoming Barriers Stories: Experiences where groups or individuals have successfully surmounted fears or obstacles inside or outside the association.
My Memorable "Member" Experiences Stories: Noteworthy situations you had as an association member, and those you heard about through others.	Our Association's Memorable "Member" Experiences Stories: Noteworthy situations with members that illuminate a specific message.

EXAMPLE: Our Association's Memorable "Member" Experience Stories (Kentucky League of Cities)

Several years ago, Glenn Caldwell, mayor of Williamstown, Ky., casually told his son, Brent, a police officer in another town, about a safety grant he had received through the Kentucky League of Cities (KLC) that underwrote most of the cost of ballistic vests for his town's police officers. Little did he know that eight months later his son would be shot in the line of duty — and survive — because Brent had told his own police chief

about what his father had secured for his town's officers. The police chief pursued and received his own safety grant through KLC to purchase the same vests; a vest Brent wore on the day he was shot.

A shortened version of the story has been used in a variety of KLC advertisements. Longer versions exist for internal member communications, public presentations and for other membership and branding ("what we stand for"

stories) media. As well, KLC honored Brent with a newly created award, called "Hometown Hero," honoring outstanding public service. About 1,100 local and state government leaders, business people, and community leaders in Kentucky attended the awards luncheon. This garnered KLC significant media attention for its efforts, thus reinforcing the organization's role and importance with existing city members and other non-member cities.

EXAMPLE: What We Do Stories (National Storytelling Network)

Within two days of the 2004 mega earthquake and tsunami hitting Southeast Asia, National Storytelling Network (NSN) members were planning public Story Tsunami storytelling concerts around the US to raise money for relief efforts. Emails flew around the nation at lightning speed among members and other storytellers, enlisting their help, while modeling the values of healing, compassion, inclusion, resiliency, hope,

and reciprocity that storytellers hold so dear.

The concerts included professional and amateur storytellers telling stories from Sumatra, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, India, Thailand, the Maldives, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, and Somalia. Bethlehem, PA even held a 12-hour Story Tsunami marathon. All of the concerts were based on the Tellabration model (i.e., a night, or about the Saturday before Thanksgiving,

to celebrate the art of storytelling held in cities and towns world-wide).

The Story Tsunami concerts were the brainchild of NSN member Lee-Ellen Marvin. With the help of NSN and many storytellers, the events raised \$56,460, an amazing volunteer effort. Today, the Story Tsunami story is periodically shared to point out to current and potential NSN members the difference that NSN and storytellers make in the world.

EXAMPLE: Future Story (American Legion Auxiliary)

After the American Legion Auxiliary (ALA) crafted a five-year strategic plan, the Oversight Committee held a Real-Time Strategic Change Event in April 2008 for several hundred leaders and volunteers to embrace its new mission, vision and breakthrough strategies. In the vision portion of the event, story was used in several ways.

First, the current president told a personal story based on the prompt: Tell me about a time in your life when you greatly resisted a change, and when you came to embrace it, you found there were many benefits

for yourself. Her main message was, “stretch beyond your comfort zone.” After individual table groups processed the story’s meaning for themselves, three incoming presidents shared a single future story they had written together titled, “We Have a Dream.” This story solidified a common vision for the upcoming years.

To introduce the three breakthrough strategies, the teams that fleshed out project plans for them presented individual eight-minute skits illuminating how the future would look when their breakthrough was

fully implemented five years later. These were followed by an “envisioning the future” activity—the creation of collages by each table group, depicting their views on the organization’s future given what they heard. These collages were placed around the room for everyone to view the next morning.

The formal stories were captured on videotape so they could be communicated to others throughout ALA as a means of inspiring members to continue with the organization and to recruit others to join based on what the future held.

In Closing

Tracking membership growth data on individual story examples like these three is difficult at best. With a coordinated strategy and plan for capturing stories and using them, success can be measured over time. Keep in mind:

1. You need to ask the right story prompts to get the right stories.
2. Not all stories are worth capturing. Take time to learn how to identify which stories are the most

compelling and have memorable key points.

3. Story is a science as much as it is an art form. Just because we talk in story does not mean we have the requisite skills to capture, craft and relay them properly. Organizations that have been most successful in this arena have secured training in a variety of story techniques (story prompts, story listening, story triggers, story selection, story crafting, story delivery, and so on).

As the old saying goes, “Whoever tells the best story wins.” What are you going to do today to ensure prospects and current members send membership dollars to your association versus the one down the street?

*Small, D., G. Loewenstein, and P. Slovic. “Sympathy and callousness: The impact of deliberative thought on

donations to identifiable and statistical victims.” *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 102 (2007) 143–153. © Copyright 2011 Lori L. Silverman and Karen Dietz.

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